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# THE SACRAMENT OF SILENCE



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# THE SACRAMENT OF SILENCE

BY  
NOEL SYLVESTRE

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## PROLOGUE

YVONNE shook her head vigorously.

“No,” she repeated. “No, René, I don’t want you to be a priest. Why will you?”

The boy raised his head on his hands and looked out over the sea.

“Oh, René, do answer,” she said impatiently, and she turned so quickly that her stiffly starched collar scratched his cheek.

René rubbed the place thoughtfully.

“I don’t think I can make you understand, Yvonne. I have a vocation. Monsieur le Curé told me so the last time he confessed me.”

“I don’t see how he can know,” said Yvonne pouting.

“There are certain signs,” answered the boy gravely, “but I can’t quite explain them,” and he paused for a moment as if trying to

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remember the words of the curé. In spite of his sabots and cotton blouse he appeared to be of higher rank than the peasant class. His eyes had the dreamy look of the mystic, as if they concealed some hidden treasure and wished to guard it from inquisitive glances. Just now he seemed to have forgotten he was speaking until Yvonne recalled him to the fact by a petulant request to go on.

"But I don't know how to explain it to you. Look, Yvonne, it's like this," and he pointed out across the sea which lay calm and seemingly limitless under the flashing sunlight. "It sort of draws one, doesn't it?"

"I don't care," said Yvonne with a little break in her voice, and her eyes grew suspiciously large. "You promised to marry me, René."

"But that was long ago when we were quite small. I am twelve now ; and you forget," he added with a sense of his own importance, "that I am going to the seminary after Christmas. You are still such a baby, Yvonne. I don't believe you are nine yet," he said, suddenly turning his head so that he could see her, and looking at her keenly.

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"I am nearly ten," protested Yvonne indignantly, and two large tears rolled slowly down her cheeks.

René fished a red pocket handkerchief out of his blouse, and carefully wiped them away. "Never mind, Yvonne dear, when I am a priest you can confess to me."

But Yvonne only sobbed more loudly. "I don't like confession, I hate it."

"Eh, what's that?" and a tousled head and blue eyes sparkling with mischief appeared suddenly over the cliff, and with a shout and a heave a boy younger than René swung himself over the top and landed on the grass at their feet.

"Who's going to confession? Who's been doing what?" he panted. "Look, René," he went on without waiting for an answer. "I climbed up right over those cliffs by the gull's nest and there were four young ones—I say, what's happened to it?"

"What's happened to what?" asked René.

"Why, the young bird, you duffer. I tucked it into my jersey. Oh, if I haven't gone and lost it. Drat it all."

Yvonne peeped round the corner of the

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red handkerchief with which she was still dabbing her eyes.

"I hope you didn't hurt it, and it flew away. I am glad it escaped. It's horrid of you catching little birds."

"What were you going to do with it?" asked René.

"Sell it, of course, you fool. Look, Yvonne, stop that silly crying, and look at my toe," and he stuck out a sunburnt, dusty foot in her direction.

"Oh, Sébastien, it's bleeding," cried Yvonne excitedly.

The boy looked down at her quizzically, and a sudden smile flitted over his bronzed face.

"You seem jolly pleased about it."

"I so love tying them up," she said apologetically. "But does it hurt really? Badly? What can I tie it up with?"

"Take that handkerchief, and do be quick. See, it's making a horrid mess of your apron," for Yvonne had drawn the wounded foot on to her lap.

"But it isn't mine, it's René's."

René was standing on the edge of the cliff,



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idly kicking the pebbles over it, with his blouse tucked up and his hands in his pockets.

"It's not mine either," he said sullenly without looking round. "I can't give it you."

"Been prigging?" asked Sébastien mockingly, and seizing the handkerchief out of Yvonne's hand, he began to try to tear it across.

René's color rose.

"Stop that, Sébastien, I tell you it isn't mine."

"Too late," cried Sébastien coolly, for with a final effort he had ripped it right across. "Here, have half," and he held it up exultantly before the elder boy's face.

René, with a face as red as the handkerchief, rushed at him furiously.

"Come on and fight," cried Sébastien, springing up and squaring his sturdy shoulders. "Oh no, I forgot, he's a little *kloarek*. He mustn't fight! He's too good to fight!" and he leaped about René tauntingly, tearing the handkerchief across and across.

Yvonne looked pleadingly at René, but he turned away, the hot tears welling into his

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eyes. At least they needn't see him crying, but was it always to be like this? Was he a coward, a milksop? Yet what was the good of fighting Sébastien? It was so useless. He always got the best of it. "But I'm not a coward. I know I am not a coward," he kept repeating between his clenched teeth, as with hands dug deep in his pockets he turned his back to the sea and the sun, and took his way homewards.

Yvonne had flung away the shreds of the handkerchief which Sébastien had given her. "You can tie your foot up yourself," she cried hotly. "It's you who are the coward—you—you—you kill little birds, and you are always teasing—and you're horrid, and—" but her indignation was checked by her tears, and she fled as fast as she could after René.

But René never thought of her, and never even looked back. He was walking rapidly, for the sooner he got home and got his punishment over the better. Not that he minded a beating. In a dumb way he realized that it relieved his mother, and she was always kinder to him after one, but he knew she had set store by that handkerchief. It was

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a fairing a friend had brought her last year from Auray, and he felt angry with himself for letting Sébastien destroy it. Why was it he couldn't fight, and be like other boys? Was he a coward after all? No, no, it wasn't that. It was—he knew it—that some day he would be a priest. A priest! Ah, how wonderful that would be. A smile spread over his face, irradiating it, as he thought of it. To hold Christ in his hands! His heart glowed with the thought. He felt as if there were a light all around him, enveloping him. No, he mustn't fight, but he would bear his beating silently, he wouldn't split on Sébastien, then he would be punished for him. That was what the curé was preaching about on Sunday, "vicarious suffering," he had tried so hard to remember the words. It was the way Christ had suffered for us, the curé said.

He was almost home now, and could see his mother in her white cap standing at the door looking out for him. She had toiled and worked all her life single-handed, for his father had been drowned at sea when he was only two. It was then she had vowed him

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to the priesthood, and she had saved every sou she could out of her hardly won earnings. But it had been a stiff fight. Was it to be wondered at that she had grown hard in the process, like many another among her neighbors? But René was [so used to her shrill tongue and her rough hand that he was hardly conscious of it. Boy as he was, he had depth of character enough to recognize the unselfishness which lay behind it all.

\* \* \* \* \*

Not many minutes later the vicaire was slowly ascending the hill, reciting his office as he went. The short gasping sobs of a child crying caught his ear and he looked up from his book. Huddled up on the steps of the wayside calvary, her white cap gleaming against the gray stone, lay a little disconsolate figure. The vicaire bent over her.

“What is it, *ma petite*? Are you hurt?”

“No, ” sobbed Yvonne, “it’s René?”

“René?” questioned the vicaire, “René who?”

“René Kermarec.”

“Oh, the little *kloarek*? What’s the matter with him?”

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"He's a coward," sobbed the child, "and I want to marry him."

The vicaire's eyes twinkled.

"That's a funny reason to marry, *ma petite*, though I wish all cowards could be married," he added half to himself, "it might make men of them. But why is René a coward? What has he done?"

Yvonne's sobs were ceasing. She sat up and began to dry her eyes with the corner of her bright blue apron.

"He didn't do anything. I wanted him to fight."

"And René wouldn't fight?"

"No," said Yvonne, raising her tear-stained face to the vicaire.

"Whose battle was it, little one?" and the thought crossed his mind how many battles would be fought for that beautiful child's face, and those deep violet eyes, which looked up half shyly at him. "Was it God's or the devil's, eh?"

For a moment there was silence as the two stood under the cross which looked black against the sunset glow—the tall figure of the

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priest and the little child in her white cap and gay apron.

"I don't know," she whispered.

The vicaire laid his large sunburnt hand on the child's head. "Well, *chérie*, sometimes the bravest soldier is the one who refuses to fight in a bad cause, and the priest's weapon is the cross," and he raised his hand and made the sacred sign over Yvonne's head. Then for a moment he knelt on the granite step at the foot of the crucifix, before he pursued his way up the dusty road.

## CHAPTER I

WHAT'S the cause of all this misery?" asked Captain Gaunt, as he idly felt in the pockets of his tweed for a coin in answer to the solicitations of a little French journalist. They were standing on the doorstep of the hotel at Douarnenez, and enjoying the warmth of the winter sun, for it was one of those bright days in late January which come as a foretaste of spring.

"It is the famine among the fish, Monsieur."

Young Gaunt's eyes danced with mischief.

"Poor fish," he said gravely. "Are you collecting for them?"

"But no, Monsieur, I collect for the men and women and child." And M. Duval spread out his hands with a gesture of despair at the ignorance of the young Englishman.

"And the fish?"

"The fish, Monsieur, but nobody knows! They are off—gone," and he shrugged his shoulders in disgust at the stupidity of the

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language in which one could never find the right word.

"And they are starving, poor fish!" repeated Gaunt, his eyes still dancing as he saw the suppressed anger of the Frenchman. He loved to excite this little journalist, for the more excited he was, the worse grew his English.

"Ah, Monsieur will not understand. Monsieur has perhaps never been hungry?"

"I was a jolly hungry little devil in my training ship," answered Gaunt, pulling out a box of cigarettes. "Here, have one? Abdullas not bad."

"But Monsieur is too good. We have not very fine smokes here. But my list?"

"By Jove, I was forgetting. Here, Monsieur," and he held out two five-franc pieces. "And now I must be off and get my cycle."

"Merci, Monsieur. And I implore you go not near the small villages. It is not safe."

"Good Lord!" ejaculated the Englishman, "do you think I shall be murdered?"

"No, Monsieur, I trust not, but hunger does make the devil to rise in a man."



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“Many things do that—a bad lunch, for example.”

But Duval was too much in earnest to take any notice of the allusion. He laid a restraining hand upon Gaunt.

“Pardon me, Monsieur, but it is serious, and I entreat you not to go alone.”

Gaunt laughed.

“But I know—I say it not for nothing. I have been out and in among them. The men, they starve, their stomachs are empty, and then they drink, and they drink on an empty stomach!” and the little man ended with a shrug more expressive than words.

Gaunt laughed again. What funny fellows these Frenchmen were: so sensational and dramatic. He had been trying to make out a column in *Le Courrier de Finistère* at breakfast that morning, all about *La Misère en Bretagne*. Shouldn't be surprised if the fellow wrote it himself. He's just sent out to harrow our feelings and collect money for some paper or other.

“What paper do you write for? Is it *Le Courrier de Finistère* by any chance?”

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"Ah! But how did Monsieur guess?" cried Duval excitedly.

"The style," answered Gaunt smiling.

"Well, good morning. I must be off."

"Monsieur, Monsieur, I implore you."

But the Englishman shook him off with a laugh.

"Au revoir," he called as he ran down the steps, "and success to your begging."

"These fool-hardy English," muttered Duval. "But I did my best, I warned him."

It had indeed been a hard winter for the fishers. There was a touch of exaggeration and sensationalism no doubt in Duval's article, but the facts were true. The women and children were starving, and the men too. Perhaps it was worst for the men, as they hung about by the piers, their hands dug deep in their pockets, stamping their feet to keep themselves warm, and looking out with dull, hopeless eyes over the sea sparkling in the winter sunshine. Morning by morning a few boats would set sail, hoping that perhaps luck would turn and the sardines come back to their accustomed banks; but only to return each evening empty. The idlers on the

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pier and by the wharves laughed and jeered as with hard set faces the fishermen picked out a few stray mackerel which were entangled in their nets, breaking the fine meshes and, stringing them together, without a word even to each other, they would turn their faces towards *Le Lion d'Or*, where at least they could find forgetfulness, and perhaps loosen their tongues and so ease their hearts.

Sébastien le Moigne was generally a cheerful person, but hunger and misery had deadened his spirits. He didn't feel like joining the others at the Inn that evening, so making some grim joke about the good supper awaiting him at home, he toiled wearily up the steep road to his mother's cottage. It was a bare place at best. The floor was of hardened earth. Against the wall stood a dark old dresser, and on it were some scattered remains of a meal. On the stones of the open fireplace lay some smouldering embers of charred wood, and on either side was set a rough stool. The only sign of comfort was the bed: a great heavy wooden bedstead, piled high with a red duvet. It was an heirloom which had descended from fam-

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ily to family. Poor indeed must be the Breton who cannot boast of some such bed.

A voice came faintly from within its depths.

"Is that you, Sébastien? Have you got anything with you?" and a bony, shaking hand thrust itself out of the bed-clothes.

"Nothing," said Sébastien shortly, seating himself on a stool by the empty hearth, and, leaning his chin on his hands, he glared sullenly at the wood embers.

"Still no fish?"

"Not one."

The old woman sobbed weakly.

"I am so hungry," she wailed.

"Well, so am I," growled Sébastien.

"I want some soup," she moaned. "I want a cup of hot soup."

Sébastien started up, overturning the stool.

"Stop that," he cried with an oath, "I can't bear it," and he came across to her bedside. "I tell you I haven't a sou, mother. It's no use. I have been out in the bay all day."

The old woman tried to choke down her sobs, and took his great hand in hers. Both their hands were rough and hard with toil.

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"Where's Yvonne?" he asked fiercely.

"She went out, I don't know where," and she tried to steady her voice.

"I'll find her," he said, and, seizing his cap, he flung out of the cottage.

The sun was nearly set now. Lines of crimson and gold barred the sky, and the sea shimmered and trembled under the sudden burst of glory. He shaded his eyes and looked down the straight white road which was fenced on either side by banks of withered gorse. Behind him lay a little group of cottages, and the spire of the parish church was silhouetted against the orange gleam of the reflected light of the setting sun. But he could see none of the beauty, for an angry despair had hold of him.

"There's no God," he kept muttering. "God's gone. It's all lies. What's the use?"

He had worked so hard. He had done his best to joke and keep up his mother's and Yvonne's spirits, and this was all his reward. His mother's complaints and groans maddened him. There was nothing more he could do. Not even the torture of hunger would drive him to beg.

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Slowly over the brow of the hill a dark figure came in sight. As he drew nearer Sébastien recognized the curé of the neighboring village. He was short and round, with a face burnt red by the sun and wind, and he had a kind, good-natured expression. He held his finger in his breviary to mark the place, but seemed to know the particular part of the office he was then engaged on by heart, for his lips moved articulating the words while his eyes scanned the road in front of him.

Sébastien sullenly removed a hand from his pocket to touch his cap. The curé returned the salutation with a courteous sweep of his hand. What a look of desperation that fellow has on his face, he thought to himself, as his lips went on moving mechanically. Not one of my flock, yet I rather wish I had spoken to him; and having reached the end of his office, he crossed himself and, slipping his book into his cassock pocket, he looked back.

But Sébastien was already out of sight. He strode along with a fixed unseeing look in his eyes. After all, his comrades at *Le Lion*

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*d'Or* were wiser than he. He would go and join them. At least he could forget his misery for a while if he drank enough. The gnawing pain of hunger is hard, but it's worse to see the woman one loves best in all the world starving. Where could Yvonne be? Every day she grew paler and thinner, and his mother too—and Sébastien shuddered as he thought of her. To hear an old woman cry for hunger is a frightful thing. He would do anything to get food, yes, anything, he thought angrily. Nothing would stop him now—neither the fear of God nor the devil. Hunger is the fiercest goad that man, the ordinary man, can know.

In the clear air heavy footsteps made a hollow echo as they came up the road towards Audierne. It was a firm tread, not the clatter of sabots. Sébastien looked up with a peasant's curiosity, for what stranger would be coming to this little village so late in the evening? A cheery voice hailed him, but the greeting did not please him.

“*Gar song.*”

Sébastien shrugged his shoulders. “I am not going to be at the beck and call



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of those rich English," he thought to himself.

"*Garson*, look here, *voyez*," and Captain Gaunt seized the fisherman's arm with his free hand as he appeared to be making off. "Can't you see, man," and he pointed to his cycle. "It's punctured, broke," and he tried by vehement gesticulations to make Sébastien understand the situation.

Sébastien shook himself free angrily. He was in no mood to be trifled with.

Captain Gaunt's stock of French was very small. He passed his hand over his cropped curly hair. Then a thought struck him. Diving into his pockets of his tweed coat he brought out a handful of coins, and, pointing towards his bicycle, said very slowly, as if repeating some charm, "Mend. Mend. Mend."

Let the devil get but a little way into a man's heart and reason will go out of his mind. Irritated, half mad with hunger, roused by a sense of an insane jealousy, and catching the glitter of gold among the coins, Sébastien in a sudden access of rage threw himself upon the young Englishman. Cap-



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tain Gaunt let his bicycle fall with a crash. He was lithe, sinewy and strong, and if he had not been taken unawares he would have felled Sébastien in a moment, for the latter had only weight in his favor. But just as he was closing with him, the Breton with a sudden jerk wrenched his arm free, and seized his fisherman's knife which lay concealed under his jersey, stuck into his trousers. Without a thought of hurting his opponent, but from the mere animal instinct of self-preservation, he dug it deep into Gaunt's breast.

With an agonized gasp, as if for breath, and a clutching of the air with empty hands, the Englishman fell forward with his face to the ground on the dusty road.

Sébastien started back with horror. What had he done? How could he have done it? He was no murderer, but one who passed among his companions as a decent-living fellow, with few vices, though of a stiff temper, and not a man to provoke in a hurry. All thought of him as one who lived a straight life, was seldom seen in the *tavernes*, and took his earnings home to his mother, whom he

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never neglected, though few words of tenderness for her ever passed his lips.

A sudden feeling of abject terror, such as he had never experienced in all his life, seized upon him and struck him cold, seeming to paralyze all action. And then with a quick transition came a desperate desire for flight.

He looked round. Where could he go? Surely the whole world had seen the deed; and for the first time he tasted the full agony of the feeling which would pursue him for many a long day and night—the feeling of the hunted. Already an expression of furtive fear had crept into his eyes. He peered anxiously in every direction in the gathering darkness, but could see nothing save the long white road, and in the near distance the line of gray horizon from which all the glittering glory had died.

His teeth chattered, and he crossed himself mechanically. He had all the Breton's superstitious fear of death. A thin, red stream was slowly trickling towards him, coagulating the dust and staining the road. He moved aside to let it pass, with an exclamation of terror, and then he realized that

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he still held his knife, and that warm drops of blood were dripping on to his hand and stealing down his jersey. The horror of it had him in its grasp. With a yell of frenzied fright he flung the hateful thing far from him among the dead furze bushes, and fled. How loud the clatter of his sabots sounded in the empty stillness! Surely it would rouse the village, and they would be coming out of their cottages to see what was the matter. He drew them off cautiously and threw them into the ditch. Why, already there was someone standing at the cross roads with outstretched arms to catch him, and with the low long cry of a hunted animal he cleared the ditch with a bound and rushed across the field which lay between him and a little frequented and rough path which led down to Pont-Croix.

But there was no one by the cross roads, save the lonely figure of the patient Christ with hands nailed in blessing against the sky.

## CHAPTER II

THE vicaire closed the garden door of the presbytère and crossed the strip of cobbled street to the south porch of the old church. This was the time he loved best to spend a quiet hour there: when the dusk was creeping on, and when the little children and the women would pass in and out to pay their evening visit to that Presence invisible and yet so all-pervading, in the hushed stillness of the gathering light. As he paused to dip his finger into the *bénédiction* he was conscious of a girl in a peasant's cap behind him, so he turned and with ready courtesy offered her the holy water.

René Kermarec had changed but little since his boyhood. The Seminary had rather fostered the characteristics with which nature had endowed him, than widened or altered them. He had entered a dreamy boy, very sensitive and full of the importance of his vocation; he had come out an idealist, if you will, his imagination set on fire by the books

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of piety he had been given, and by all he had read and listened to of the romances of the saints, and with a burning desire to suffer as they had done. No work, it seemed to him, could be too great, no pain too hard to bear, for in the words of Saint Francis, love had set his heart on fire. It was a mystic's love, which shrank from any contact with the earthly, but which children understood, and which drew them to him in a reverent, awful way. They feared, and yet longed, to feel his hand upon their head in blessing; but it was in the confessional they loved him most. Himself a child in mind, he understood the gravity of their sins and temptations, and their hearts filled with joy as he spoke to them in a grown-up way—which is really the child's way—and exhorted them.

M. le Curé, with his hearty laugh and light penances, was not loved half so much by the children as the grave and serious vicaire. But the men went, when the Church's law compelled them, to the curé.

"It's M. le Curé for me," said Jules Cariou, their spokesman. "He knows the taste of good wine, and takes pleasure in a pretty

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face. None of your long-drawn faces and canting priests for me, but a man who can sit over a pipe with you, and enjoys his jokes too."

"And his sermons," joined in Yves-Marie Queré the sabot maker, with a whiff of tobacco escaping slowly from his lips, "they are something worth hearing. I was trembling myself last time he preached on hell, and the wife was near to fainting. That's the sort of sermon to turn a man from his sins: good hot flames and the devil pulling you by the hair. I was for keeping mine close cropped after that," he added, chuckling at his own joke.

There was a warm affection between the curé and his vicaire, unlike to one another as they were, or, as the sage would say, because of their dissimilarity of character. It is true the older man often winced at the younger's superior air; and the younger in his secret heart sometimes despised his jovial curé as he sat at supper with him, in evident relish of some extra good dish which Jeannette had provided for them; yet he honored him too. For none knew better than René the child-

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like simplicity of the good man's soul, and his genuine unselfishness and love for his flock.

He was thinking of him now, as he threaded his way through the scattered chairs in the nave of the church. Two nuns of the order of "*Les Filles de Jésus*" were busily telling their beads. They got up and moved their prie-dieux to let him pass, and returned his salutation, without, however, ceasing to move their lips in prayer. The glow of the lamp burning before the Blessed Sacrament, in the Lady chapel, cast a flickering light and made the shadows of the arches dance on the uneven old stone floor. But the vicaire only paused there for a moment. His favorite spot was the north transept, with its double row of romanesque pillars with their beautifully curved arches. Here he hardly ever found any one else. The nuns and devout peasant women, who made a daily practice of saying their night prayers in their parish church, either chose the Lady chapel, or prayed before the statues of the Holy Mother and Saint Joseph, which stood against the great chancel arch. There amid the tinsel flowers a few candles were nearly always burning. But here



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in this dark corner there was no array of candles or artificial flowers to mar the solemn stateliness; only the jeweled light which the sun cast when it streamed through the painted windows, and which lay scattered on the floor like the petals of some brilliant nosegay, or when towards dusk the stones were stained blood-red from the reflection of the lamp burning before our Lady's altar. There were no statues even, only a boat hanging suspended from the ceiling, dusty now with age; the gift, no doubt, of some pious peasant, perhaps a thankoffering for some life saved.

The vicaire began his prayer by his customary and almost mechanical recitation of the shorter rosary, which takes so large a place in the Breton's devotions; but the silence and the peace of the stately building, the pillars of which, in the semi-darkness, seemed to soar endlessly upward, sank into his soul, and his lips ceased to move. The silence was only broken by the occasional scraping of a chair, and the clatter of sabots as someone left or entered the church. Even of this interruption he was hardly conscious, as his thoughts drifted on into that speechless com-



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munion with the unseen which makes up so large a part of a good man's prayer. But quite suddenly he became aware of a curious sound—at least it was curious here in the quiet church; for it was like the panting of some hunted animal gasping for breath. It seemed to come from within a few yards of him.

He got up noiselessly and walked softly on tiptoe in the direction from whence the sound came. He moved almost as in a dream, his soul being still possessed by that peace which passeth all understanding.

In a corner, crouching on the stone pavement, was a man in a fisher's jersey. He must have run hard, for his shoulders were heaving with his gasps for breath.

The vicaire laid a gentle hand on his rough jersey.

"What is the matter?" he asked.

But the man shrank from his touch.

"Leave me, leave me," he moaned.

Now when a man in deep distress asks to be left alone, it is a sure sign to the compassionate that he stands more than most in need of help. The voice too touched some

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chord in René's memory. Although he had come back to Pont-Croix at his mother's earnest wish, his work so far had taken him but little among the fishers, and he had seldom left the radius of his own parish. A certain shyness too prevented him mixing with those with whom in the old days he used to play on equal terms. He should hardly know how to address them, nor they him. Thus he had confined himself chiefly to the children, the curé doing most of the visiting; and all his leisure he had spent in his room with his books.

He racked his brains trying to remember to whom the voice belonged.

"Look here, *mon gâs*," he said, using the familiar Breton word, "I want to help you, and I seem to know your voice. Just lift your head so that I can see who you are."

The man turned his face so that the light from the sanctuary lamp fell upon it. It had the ashen look of a face tanned by exposure when all the color has left it, his eyes seemed to be starting out of his head as if in terror, and the sweat was pouring down in streams. He wiped it away with a defiant

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gesture, and the vicaire noticed that his hand was stained with something red.

"Yes, you know me, or used to. I am Sébastien le Moigne; and would to God," he added desperately, between his gasps, "I were any other man."

The vicaire looked round, reminded by a smothered cough that there were still one or two people lingering in the church, and here in all probability was the need for secrecy. There could be no doubt that Sébastien, who had now sunk back into his former hopeless attitude, had fled from somewhere and something; but where or why he had still to discover.

"Here, come with me," and taking him by the arm he drew him towards a confessional. "We shall attract less notice here."

Sébastien shuddered, and as he raised himself the vicaire noticed that his feet were bare, and that he limped painfully. He must have been climbing over very rough ground, he thought.

Then opening his confessional door, and seeing his surplice hanging on its peg, an idea struck him.

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“I will help you all I can, le Moigne, but would you not rather—would it not be easier—to tell me what has happened here—under the seal of confession?”

Sébastien leaned, he could hardly stand he was shaking so, against a pillar. They were close to Our Lady’s altar, and the light from the lamp shone full on his face. The priest started. Sébastien, whom he remembered as a merry, handsome lad, every one’s favorite, could this be he, with his eyes dulled and glazed by suffering and hunger; his teeth chattering with fear; his whole aspect one of cowed and frightened helplessness? His old sense of comradeship returned.

“Oh, Sébastien, what have you done?” he cried.

“I have killed—”

But René stopped the words upon his lips.

“No, no, don’t tell me. Not like this. Tell me in there,” and he pointed to the space behind the green curtain of the confessional, where the crucifix hung over the prie-dieu. There was a certain fear too in his voice, as the consequences of the deed suddenly swept

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over his mind. Murder! And his old playmate to be punished for it, and he to bear witness.

His hands were trembling as he took his crimped surplice off its peg and put it on, and he shuddered too as he placed the stole around his neck. He sat down on his bench and, drawing the curtain across, buried his face in his hands in an agony of prayer for guidance. He had heard scores of confessions in the short months of his priesthood, but they were mostly from the stammering lips of children, or the quavering tones of an old woman's voice would reach his ear, or sometimes perhaps a girl's voice, preoccupied with self and imaginary sins. "Oh, God," he groaned, "help me; guide me." And then he steadied his voice to say the customary *In Nomine*, and hearing no sound from the other side of the grating, he gave the blessing and waited.

Sébastien was still panting for breath. He shook the wooden partition. It was like the noise an animal makes when in pain.

"I have sinned," he began in broken tones, "by my fault, my own fault," but he recoiled

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from the words said so often and so glibly in past years. "Ah, no, *mon père*," he moaned, "I didn't mean it. It was all done in a second, before I knew what I was doing. He angered me. I was starving."

When once started Sébastien's words came pouring out in a torrent, and as the vicaire listened the sweat gathered on his brow.

"It was a vile deed. Are you sorry from your heart? "

Sébastien groaned. "I would to God I had never set eyes on him."

"Do you repent?" questioned the priest again. "Have you thought what it cost the good God to redeem that man's soul? What His purposes were for that man? You have wrecked the purposes of God. You will have to answer on the Judgment Day for that man's blood—for his sins—for which you gave him no time for repentance. Have you thought of the misery you have brought on his relations? His wife, perhaps—his mother—his father; all his friends? "

Reminiscences of a sermon he had heard from a celebrated preacher at Saint Sulpice, on the sin of murder, were coming glibly to his

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lips. For the moment he had forgotten the sinner in the sin, but his eloquence was suddenly quenched by the sound of a heavy body falling, and a crash of broken plaster. He started from his seat. Sébastien was lying with his head on the book-rest of the prie-dieu, his arm having knocked down the little brown and gold plaster crucifix which hung above it, and which lay in atoms on the floor.

“Fool that I am,” he thought, “the man’s exhausted; faint for want of food,” and he looked at the broad and horny hand which lay helpless on the ground, and which was worn and thin as an old man’s, so that the veins and muscles were distinctly outlined.

Tearing off his surplice, which he feared might attract attention, René rushed down the deserted north transept through the side door, and hastened across to the presbytère. A small door opened into the garden where the curé was pacing up and down the narrow path reciting his breviary.

“What’s the matter?” he ejaculated, as the vicaire came running past.

“Don’t hinder me, *mon père*, I want some brandy,” and he rushed into the kitchen where



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an ill-favored looking woman in a peasant's cap was busy cooking.

"For the love of God, Jeannette, some brandy?"

Jeannette stared with astonishment, but took down a wineglass from the shelf.

"Not for myself," he cried. "I want a bottle—a flask."

Still silent the old woman, with a certain quiet dignity, as if acceding to the request of an impatient schoolboy, took a pint bottle from a cupboard, and began to search for a smaller one into which to pour some of its contents, but the vicaire seized upon it and fled precipitately.

Her anger was now aroused and she followed him into the garden, but only in time to see a black end of cassock as he whisked through the garden door which he banged behind him. The curé, with an expression of amazement on his round face, turned and confronted her.

"Monsieur," she began in a tone the curé knew well and dreaded accordingly, "Monsieur, I won't be treated like this in my own kitchen."



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The curé spread out his hands deprecatingly.

"He's young, Jeannette, he's young, and all young men are rash."

"Don't interrupt me, Monsieur," she said sternly, "I was about to tell you—"

"I know, Jeannette, I know," broke in the curé soothingly. "But you wouldn't leave me alone with him, would you?"

Jeannette pondered. It was the second time that week that she had felt compelled to "resign her post" as she put it.

"I am afraid Monsieur would manage very badly without me," she said in the tone of one discussing something in which she hadn't the slightest interest.

"Why, the presbytère wouldn't be the same without you," he answered cheerily, "and you know I should have the most frightful indigestion unless you were here to prepare my dishes for me."

"Well, Monsieur," she said, somewhat relaxing her dignity, "you must speak seriously to M. René."

"Now, Jeannette," and the curé shook his finger warningly at her. "You know I told you not to call him M. René."

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"I have known him all my life by that name and I am not going to change now," she answered calmly, "and I cannot stand his high and mighty ways, nor the airs he gives himself, nor the dirt he brings into the house with all those brats."

The curé glanced regretfully at his breviary. This was a sore subject with Jeannette, and one which had no spice of novelty to relieve it. But just then a smell of burnt milk was wafted to them from the kitchen.

"*Le bon Dieu* is punishing you, Jeannette," chuckled the curé after her retreating figure, as she retired with more haste than dignity to her own domain.

### CHAPTER III

AS the vicaire had hastily fled from the kitchen he had caught up a pair of sabots, which he wore for gardening, and with these under his arm and the brandy bottle hidden as well as he could under his cassock, he hastened back to the church with his mind full of schemes for Sébastien's escape. No thought of giving him up to justice ever entered the young priest's head, for after all was he not his old playmate? But where had he met the Englishman and how soon would the body be discovered and escape become impossible? The church was very dark now, and the scattered worshipers had all gone. So much to the good, but very soon the old sacrist would come clattering his bunch of keys, and lock up. He must be quick.

Sébastien was just regaining consciousness when he got back, and after the vicaire had forced some spirits down his throat, he groaned and opened his eyes. In an agony of impatience René knelt by his side chafing his hands.

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"Here, swallow some more of this," he said, guiding the bottle to his mouth, "and see, I have brought you these. Put them on quickly," and he set the sabots down by Sébastien's side. "But for God's sake be quick. Old Jacques may be round at any moment to lock up."

"Why, where am I?" asked Sébastien huskily; then suddenly the whole naked truth forced itself upon him. The look of a hunted animal crept back into his eyes. He grasped René by the arm. "Save me! Save me!" he cried convulsively.

"I am trying, only trust me. And now, can you stand all right? So," and he exerted all his strength and dragged Sébastien on to his feet.

"Yes," said Sébastien, helping himself along by the wall to steady himself, "I am all right. I can walk now quite well."

"Then follow me as noiselessly as you can."

"Where to?" he asked, stooping to brush off the dust from his jersey.

"Stop, wait a moment," whispered René as they reached the door. "Here, hold your hand steady," and dipping his hand into the

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holy water stoup he laved some over Sébastien's blood-stained hand. "I would to God it may help to cleanse your soul," he added, signing himself with the Cross and laying his hand on Sébastien's. Sébastien, still half-dazed, stood stolidly, not moving.

"Quick," said the priest peremptorily, holding open the swing door.

Sébastien shrank back.

"I daren't go out into the street," he muttered, "every one will see me."

"But they don't know anything about it yet," answered René, trying to reassure him. "It's your only chance, man," he added, as Sébastien still hung back.

"Where are you taking me?"

"Down to the pier at Audierne. Quick, now, *mon gâs* . . . I heard them talking to-day—two of the men—they were going to start to-night, they said, when the tide was up for Iceland." René was talking for all he was worth, as he hurried Sébastien along. He had him by the arm, for he still limped painfully. "It is lucky it is so dark," he said, as they turned the corner of the church into the high road.

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"Was it Pierre Lepoux and Guillaume Corbet?" asked Sébastien.

"Yes, I think so. I met them at Mère Guillaume's and she called them Pierre and Guillaume."

"Do you know them?"

"No, I never saw them before. They are not much at home, I gathered."

"No, that's true," answered Sébastien shortly.

He was debating within himself. The greatest rascals to be found in the whole parish, these two, but why tell the vicaire? What choice had he—or what need for choice? A murderer, to be ashamed of such company! and he laughed bitterly to himself. On shore penal servitude. On sea—? Well, the devil would have him sooner or later. But surely had he not been in the confessional? What had happened? He felt dazed still. He passed his hand across his forehead, which still felt clammy. Everything seemed blotted out by his sudden faint. Had he not confessed? Had he not been absolved? Oh, to be out of the clutches of this powerful devil, so real a person to the Breton peasant.

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"Monsieur," he asked, and cold as the air felt, the hot blood surged into his face. "Monsieur, did I not confess?"

"Yes," said the vicaire.

"And was I not absolved?"

"You fainted," said the priest gently; and then he felt compelled to add, "But even if you had not, I daren't have given you absolution—not without more knowledge; and, besides, you would have to promise . . ." but the words died upon his lips.

"Then you are sending me to hell." There was a hard note of hopelessness in Sébastien's voice, and he shook himself free of the vicaire's grasp.

The two men were now well on the way to Audierne, hurrying along as fast as they could without attracting attention. Already the tide was up, and the river, which they were skirting, lapped against the stone dyke which had been built along its bank.

All had happened so suddenly that the vicaire had had little time for thought, but these words, almost hissed out in their bitterness, recalled him to himself. What was he doing? He, a priest, what right had he to try



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to let a guilty man escape? Was not his first duty to persuade him to give himself up to justice? Was he indeed sending him to hell in helping him to avoid his punishment and letting him go off unabsolved? What had his training at the seminary taught him; that course of casuistry? How little good it seemed to him face to face with the real facts and problems of life, with crime in its awful actuality. What was the use of theories now? He felt sure he had read somewhere that for a priest to hide another's crime, except under the seal of confession, was a grave sin, besides being punishable by law. Yet his whole soul revolted at the thought of letting his old comrade be caught, or persuading him to give himself up. It was morally impossible to him; he couldn't do it, were he to imperil his soul ever so gravely. But Sébastien's words sent a cold shiver through him. "You are sending me to hell." How well he knew the superstitions of the Breton fisher! Had he not had to fight against them, in his own mind too, as well as in the minds of others, for, after all, he was but a peasant himself. And how often he had argued with the curé



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about the mistake of trading on these superstitions in sermons and the like. A soul unabsolved they believed to be the devil's plaything.

René stopped suddenly in the middle of the road.

"Sébastien," and his voice was shaking with suppressed emotion, "I have done very wrong. I cannot absolve you, and I have no right to help you to escape. Come back and give yourself up to justice. They won't be hard on you," he added falteringly.

"Hard!" echoed Sébastien bitterly, "it's penal servitude for life. And what about my mother? Do you want me to break her heart, and Yvonne's?" He spoke gruffly to hide his feelings, but the vicaire knew now that he had touched the bottom of his misery.

"I forgot Yvonne," he said simply.

They were nearing the harbor and could see the lights hanging at the masts of the boats which were putting out to sea.

"You will save her all you can, won't you?" and a stifled sob escaped him. "Say—oh, say anything you will, but keep my secret from her."

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René pressed his hand.

"It's God's secret too. Never forget that, *mon ami*. And now we must part, for it is better for you to go down to the boats alone. And, Sébastien," and he laid his hand caressingly upon his shoulder, "remember that we are fellow sinners and—perhaps fellow sufferers, and that I shall never forget your name in my prayers, and that God is very pitiful and of a tender mercy. "

Sébastien brushed his hand across his eyes.

"I'll remember," he muttered, for he could find no words in which to express his true feelings.

"And take this," said René, thrusting some money into his hand. "It's all I have with me, and very little, alas."

But Sébastien pushed his hand vehemently aside.

"No, no, not that," for there suddenly flashed into his mind the recollection of the glint of the gold as it lay loose with the other coins in the Englishman's hand. Since his fainting fit it had seemed a blank to him—all that had happened before he saw the stream of red blood curdling the dust which lay

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upon the road, so that it formed little knots and islands. As long as he lived he would never forget that little stream of red—how it had recalled him to his senses! Ah, how he loathed the sight of money now! He swept his hand over his head with the same nervous gesture René had noticed before. He couldn't arrange his thoughts clearly. Had the man really been dead? No, surely not dead. It must be all some hideous mistake.

René was still standing there and with gentle persistence pressed the money again into his hand.

"Take it, for old sake's sake," he pleaded.

"It's not that," stammered Sébastien, "I can't touch the cursed thing. But see," he cried eagerly, "do this for me. Go back to the higher road across the hill, towards Pont-Croix, and look—see—perhaps he wasn't quite dead," his voice sank to a tense whisper.

"I will go at once," said René trying to soothe his fears; "I will do all I can to divert suspicion. You will trust me to do that, won't you? But don't return here for some time. Let it blow over."

"The boats sail for a year generally, but

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what will Yvonne do?" His voice broke with a sob.

"Trust her to me," repeated the vicaire, "trust me to do all I can to comfort her. And now you must not linger."

The two men wrung each other's hands in silence, and then turned away; Sébastien to go down to the quay where all was bustle and life. He heard the sound of the ropes creaking round the hawsers, and the shouts of the men giving their last orders. He was not a minute too soon, and he hastened his steps for he had no fear of being refused; he knew Pierre well, and knew that they were short of a man for their voyage, which he would make his excuse for joining them.

And the vicaire, with a heavy heart, went quickly along the row of houses facing the harbor, and then turned sharply up the hill. The stars were piercing through the sky like the points of a bayonet, and a purple robe of shadow was settling down on the gorse-covered heath.

## CHAPTER IV

THE vicaire opened his window and leaned out. He could hear the sound of the river lapping against the stone dyke, and to tired nerves there is nothing more soothing than the monotonous sound of water. The stars were still very bright and the moon was rising.

He had got back to find the curé had been waiting for him, and had only just sat down to supper; and he had been in agony all through the meal lest by some word or look he should betray his secret. The curé had chaffed him unmercifully about the brandy, and Jeannette had banged the dishes down in front of him in too great dudgeon to say a word.

He wiped his face with a large red handkerchief. The peasant was shown in René more by externals than by any boorishness in look or manner. He had assimilated his training at the seminary, it was no mere polish which

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could be rubbed off by contact with rougher and coarser natures. He was born gentle, and nothing could make him otherwise.

The curé's jokes at supper had grated on his sensitive mind, as they often did. "But yet he is a saint, that man," he said to himself, "and I? Oh God——"

The air from the river struck him as chilly, though a moment before he was rejoicing in its coolness. He closed the window and sat down in front of his desk, his head buried in his hands. The sense of the crime he was concealing pressed on him heavily. Already he felt as if he had been the murderer. Did not the text-books he had studied at the seminary say so? "To conceal crime is to partake in it."

And then his thoughts wandered to Sébastien. Had Corbet taken him in his boat? They would have set sail by now. The bitter words rang again in his ears, "You are sending me to hell." Yes, he had done wrong. He ought never to have suggested his escape. He should have left it to Sébastien's own conscience. Indeed he ought to have obeyed the decree of the Church and persuaded him to

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give himself up to the law. At the least he might have left things to take their course. But how could he—his old playmate too? in that pitable and frightened state he would only have fallen a prey to the first questioner he met. His crime by now would be blazoned all over the village. No, he couldn't have done that. "I would rather pay the penalty myself," he said half aloud.

But what was he to say to the sheriffs, for they would be here very soon. In fact he had dreaded finding them when he returned, for it was always to the presbytère they first came when anything unusual happened. He looked at his watch. He had found Sébastien in the church about five, and now it was just after eight o'clock. Only three hours had passed, yet what a lifetime it seemed. Still there had been plenty of time for the news to spread by now. Of course they would naturally make inquiries first at Audierne, but after that they were bound to come on to Pont-Croix, which was only two miles distant.

After René had said good-bye to Sébastien, he had gone straight to Audierne, but had found the spot with some difficulty. The



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trampled grass by the wayside had guided him. He had struck matches and peered anxiously about, but could see nothing but the angry red stains on the dusty road which he had turned from with a shudder. He knew he should be late for supper, and so quite unconsciously he had exactly followed in Sébastien's steps, climbing the low stone wall and taking the short cut across the fields, in the midst of which there lay patches of furze and heaps of loose stones; for the land is hard to cultivate in these parts. As he strode along something had tripped him up and stooping down he found that a knife had caught in the skirt of his cassock. It had a long open blade, such as the fishers use for ripping up their fish. He only remembered it just now, and he lit his candle to examine it more closely. The handle was of wood, much notched and hacked about. In one corner there seemed to have been an attempt at carving some letters, but they were almost impossible to make out. There was a twirl which might mean anything, and a rough attempt at an L or M.

"It's of no worth anyhow," thought René,



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as he thrust it away in a drawer among some papers.

Just then he heard the curé calling him. René blew out the candle, and went to the door and threw it open.

The curé was half-way upstairs.

“Have you heard?” he panted. “No, don’t come down, I am coming up. There has been a terrible murder—an Englishman. He was found dead on the roadside. He must have been dead over an hour, they say, when they found him.”

René pushed forward a chair into which the curé dropped, wiping his forehead with a large colored handkerchief. He dared not trust himself to speak, but the curé was too full of what he had heard to notice.

“They say,” he continued, still struggling to recover his breath, for he had rushed upstairs far too quickly for a man of his years, “that he had been stabbed to the heart, evidently by a long knife.”

René felt himself turn deadly pale. How glad he was that his instinct had made him blow out the candle! His lips were twitching as he asked—

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“Where was he—it—found? ”

“Lying beside the road, on the other side of the river, which leads up towards Audierne. It’s a solitary place, not many pass that way, except the men coming up from their boats, and they were in early to-night, so the men say. Yet it seems strange that no one should have seen him lying there—unless it happened after sunset; then perhaps the body might have escaped notice as it lay right under the hedge, in the shadow.”

“Have they no clue?” asked René, still trying to steady his voice.

“Not a trace of one. Some money was lying scattered about on the road, but not a sign of a weapon. They say it was a sure stroke by a practiced hand, right through the heart. He must have been killed on the spot.”

“It’s ghastly! ghastly!” and René sank into the chair by his desk and covered his face with his hands.

“It’s a dastardly murder—that’s what it is,” cried the curé hotly, “and the man who did it should be made to pay with his life. At first I was afraid it might have been one of our poor fellows. The misery is awful

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down there, and hunger drives a man to almost anything."

"But it couldn't have been, could it," broke in René, almost pleadingly, "if the money was left untouched?"

"No, that's just what I said to the gendarmes," said the curé, in a tone which showed pleasure at his own discernment. "I said that if any one had been driven to it by starvation he would have gone off with all the money he could find. And the poor gentleman's pockets were full of money. Oh, these rich English, they fill a poor man like me with envy!"

"Where are the sheriffs?" asked the vicaire.

"I advised them to go down to the hotel and see if they could find any clue there."

René snatched up his hat. He felt he must have air. He was being stifled.

"The hotel at Audierne?"

"Yes," said the curé. "But where are you off to?"

"I think I will go down to the harbor to see if I can pick up any more news."

The curé was both surprised and pleased that René should show so much interest. As

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a rule nothing could tear him away from his books after supper.

"Yes, do," he said. "Yet no—stop one moment. I was forgetting something. I have just had a letter which I must answer at once. It is from M. le Curé Doyen. He wants one of us to go to Quimperlé to preach the retreat for *les enfants de Marie*. Will you go?"

"Gladly," answered René, his face brightening. Here was something he had often longed for, and, moreover, it would take him away from Pont-Croix and distract his thoughts from what already was proving to be worse than a nightmare. How glad he would be to get right away from it all!

"Would you like to read the letter?" and there was a touch of eagerness in the old man's voice which René was too preoccupied to notice. Indeed at another time René's first thought would have been to try to persuade his curé to go himself, but anxiety makes many a man selfish.

"No, thank you, I won't wait," he said, holding the door open for the curé to pass.

The old man took the hint and put the letter back into his capacious pocket with

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something like a sigh. It was a nice letter, undeserved, but still he would have liked his young vicaire to have read it, for he doesn't always give me my due, thought the curé, rather sadly, as he stumbled down the dark staircase, blushing a little at his conceit. For really his old friend le Curé Doyen had pressed him to come with warm words of praise.

"There is no one like you," he wrote, "for getting to the hearts of the people, and awakening their conscience," but still if he could not spare the time he must send "your young saint, of whom you so often speak."

Writing had never come easy to the curé and he pushed out his underlip, as he carefully penned a reply.

"I am but a rough old priest," he wrote, "just fit to speak straight to the fishermen, but in no wise fit to handle the delicate souls of the young girls you speak of . . . I will send you my 'saint.' You will like him and he is pleased to go. He is full of zeal and of great piety, and his conscience is as sensitive as a child's."

## CHAPTER V

**T**HE moon had risen over the bay at Audierne, and the lights were twinkling in the windows of the cottages, set high on the slope of the cliff.

The vicaire paced the long wooden jetty with bent head, and watched the sheen of the water as it flowed beneath, through the gaps in between the planks. He had gathered all he wanted to know by questions thrown out casually to the knots of fishermen he had come across. Yes, *La Belle Bretonne* had sailed about seven o'clock, they thought, but they were all so taken up with the news of this dreadful and sudden tragedy which had been enacted in the village, that no one had paid much heed. The question everybody was asking was, "Who was the Englishman?" He must have been coming up the hill from Pont-Croix by the cross road, for the body was found lying on its face in the direction towards the crest of the hill. Yet there were no strangers staying in the inn at Pont-Croix,

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and the only Englishman at Audierne was now making inquiries. It was thought that he must have ridden from some distant village, for his bicycle was covered with dust. Still, the roads were all so deep in dust with the dry weather that that didn't help much. His bicycle was punctured too. It was found lying at a little distance. Was it an English make? Did M. le Vicaire know? There were some English staying at Douarnenez. Had Monsieur heard who? Had he seen them? And so on and on with endless questions. René had fled to escape all the discussion. He wanted solitude and silence; and he had it here, for only the splash of the water against the wooden piers of the jetty and the cry of the sea-gulls disturbed the stillness of the night.

But suddenly he remembered Yvonne. What of her? She would wonder why Sébastien had never returned. And old Veuve le Moigne too. They would be uneasy and be worrying. How could he have forgotten them? He had been so preoccupied by the thought of his own share in the sin, that they had entirely escaped his memory; and yet



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Yvonne had been Sébastien's last charge to him. What could he say to her? He must find some plausible excuse for Sébastien's sudden departure. He racked his brains, thinking how he might put it without deliberately lying. What a coil of trouble he was in. And only a few hours ago he had been wrapped in the peaceful silence of prayer in the old church;—in that sense of eternity which the sea, with its ceaseless flow, always awoke in him. But even the uninterrupted sound of the endless lapping of the waves against the posts of the jetty could not quiet his thoughts to-night.

He took off his hat and let the cold night air play over his head. If only he could confide in someone. Could he go to his director, the old canon at Quimper? But what could he tell him, for he knew nothing outside the seal of confession. He had carefully abstained from asking any questions of Sébastien on their way down to the harbor. Every way he looked the vicaire saw fresh difficulties. Truly one sin leads to another he thought desperately, as he tried in vain to concoct some story which was not all a lie to tell the women.



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And then his thoughts began again their circuit in the path which he had made for them, and which was to become so desperately grooved that they would circle there for many a long day to come. Had he sinned? In the eyes of the law—yes, but in his own conscience—no. He would have had little self-respect left if he had let his old comrade fall into the clutches of so-called justice. Sébastien was no real criminal. It had been a sudden, desperate deed; not premeditated. As far as René knew, Sébastien had only used his knife in self-defence. Would the law have acknowledged that? Would he have been let off lightly? There was little chance of that, a poor fisherman, with few to speak for him, and no money, moreover, with which to pay a lawyer's fee; and the other, rich—a man of importance very probably, with many friends and much influence. No, it must have gone very hardly with Sébastien if he had been caught; and his heart lifted in thanksgiving for the latter's escape.

Then he remembered Yvonne again. He must really force himself to go up to their cottage. God would tell him what to say.

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As he turned he saw a girl coming quickly along the wooden pier towards him. It was Yvonne. He could not mistake her, for she wore the broad white collar and gabled cap of Pont Aven, and no other girl in the village was dressed so. Many a time had her companions tried to persuade her to adopt the costume of Pont-Croix, but she always refused, much to their chagrin, for it was jealousy that prompted them. The beautiful peasant dress of Pont Aven makes even a plain girl look pretty, and it set off Yvonne's beauty to distraction. If she would wear the plainer cap of Audierne, she would not out-distance them so in looks, they thought.

But Yvonne, not generally obstinate, persisted in wearing the dress her mother had worn before her; her mother—God rest her soul—who now lay in the cemetery at Pont Aven, to which village Yvonne hoped some day to return. It was the old story of the sea. Her father's boat with all the crew went down one stormy night, and her father's body had never been recovered. Her mother was ill at the time, and the sudden shock of her husband's death was too much for her. They laid

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her to rest in the cemetery by the old gray church, with her little dead baby in her arms. Madame le Moigne had come to be with Marie Joncour, Yvonne's mother, in her confinement, for they were old friends and playmates; so she took the little one back with her to Audierne, for there were no near relations left save an aunt, married and with five children of her own and with no wish to be burdened by another. Yvonne was four then, a merry laughing child, the pet of every one. She won her way into Madame le Moigne's heart, in spite of her reputation for austerity and sternness, for had she not buried just such another little girl, and she had only Sébastien left. The two would be company for one another, and for her too when she grew old; for Madame le Moigne was a far-sighted woman.

At first little Yvonne wept bitterly at leaving all her companions and her home. She felt sure that if she stayed there her mother would come back some day; but if they took her far away to Audierne her mother would never be able to find her. They had taken her to the funeral and she had watched with interest while they lowered a long, black,

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funnily shaped box into the earth, but mercifully it had no connection in the child's mind with her mother; for Madame le Moigne had been too wise to enlighten her. She had answered none of the child's questions, but had given her her doll to play with, and tucked her away in bed, where, tired out with crying, she fell asleep. And as Madame le Moigne sat watching her, tears welled into her eyes too. She was just of the same age as her own daughter—another Yvonne. In a great chest, carefully put away among sweet-scented herbs, were the little caps and aprons and dresses of her own dead child. Should she let this little one wear them? No, she could never do that, they were too sacred to her. Yvonne should always wear the costume of Pont Aven, she resolved, so she carefully packed up Marie Joncourt's clothes, many of them *her* mother's before her—beautifully starched collars and lace coifs—to be ready for Yvonne when she should grow into them; and in the meantime she would make her caps and collars for her, and buy mètres of gay cashmere at the fair to make into aprons for her. It would cost money, yes, but she was strong

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and could work for both the children until they were old enough to work for themselves.

And verily Madame le Moigne had taken a ray of sunlight into her home when she had taken Yvonne. In a week the child seemed to have recovered all her spirits, and was skipping about and playing as merrily as ever; and always with her two small playmates, René Kermarec, and Sébastien, her own curly-headed son. They grew up together, these three, until the seminary claimed René, the little *kloarek*. Sébastien and she were like brother and sister, until their friendship had ripened into something deeper. He was so strong, and nothing seemed to daunt his courage. Very few of the other lads would venture up the cliffs le Moigne scaled so easily, and he looked so handsome and straight in his fisher's jersey, and was so quick and clever with the nets, that Yvonne felt a thrill of pride when she walked out with her girl-companions on Sundays and Feasts, in her gayest apron and freshest ribbons, and passed him walking with the other lads. They all looked up to le Moigne.

And then in the long summer evenings,

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after the boats were in, what times they would have together! Each time Sébastien came back to shore Yvonne seemed to him more distractingly beautiful. No wonder the other lads were jealous of her evident preference for him. Yet she was hard to woo, and only after some persistence could he get her to accept the ring he had bought for her with his hardly-kept savings, and had carried about in his pocket for many a long week. But there had been no talk of marriage yet, though in their hearts they knew it ought to be long delayed. It had been a hard struggle bringing up the two children in such poverty, and work had aged Madame le Moigne before the time. There was no *dot* for Yvonne, and she had set her hopes on Sébastien marrying the rich miller's daughter. Thus both feared to broach the subject to her. Overwork and underfeeding had changed her completely from a somewhat hard, yet at heart a kind and just woman, into a querulous and captious invalid, and little by little Sébastien had watched the savings of years of thrift disappear, and with them all hope of marriage.

Yvonne watched the lines grow harder

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round Sébastien's mouth, and his eyes sadder. He was not one to bear trouble well, and latterly had seemed to be settling down into a stupor of despair, and more than once lately he had answered her roughly. Every day things seemed to be growing worse, and when Yvonne returned that evening from a day's washing for Madame Guillaume of the Inn at Pont-Croix, she found old Madame le Moigne crying bitterly, as only the very weak can cry, and no sign of Sébastien. Yvonne had comforted her as well as she knew how, and had made her some hot coffee, and then had gone down to the harbor to try and find Sébastien. Someone had jested about her that day in a way that had wounded her to the quick. Whatever happened they must get the old curé to marry them as soon as possible, and her thoughts were busy planning how it might be done quite quietly.

Then when she got to the harbor she had found everybody talking of this horrible murder which had taken place. No rumor of it had reached their cottage on the cliff and she had met no one on her way down to tell her. She inquired shyly for Sébastien of some of



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the fishermen who were standing about, but no one had seen him since he had come back with his boat in the early afternoon; and reluctantly she was about to give it up when she caught sight of the vicaire's tall figure striding along the pier. She gave herself no time to wonder what had taken him there so late, but hastened up the jetty to meet him.

"Oh, Monsieur René," the old name slipped out in her agitation, "M. le Vicaire, I mean," she stammered in confusion, "have you seen him?"

The vicaire had no need to ask whom. For them both there was only one person in mind. Her lips were parted in suspense, her eyes were dark with anxiety as she lifted up her face to his; her white cap glistening in the moonlight like the wings of a sea-gull against a wintry sky.

"I have been looking everywhere for him," she added breathlessly. "Oh, where is he?"

The vicaire looked straight into her eyes and his lips trembled. Was this the little Yvonne he had played with so often as a boy? He had hardly spoken to her since he had returned a full-fledged priest to Pont-Croix,



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for he seldom went out of his own parish; yet if he had only known it, Yvonne had many a time played truant from her own parish church and, hidden behind a pillar in the old church of Pont-Croix, sat drinking in every word of his sermon at the High Mass.

He must lie to her. That was René's first thought as he saw the tears ready to spring into her eyes.

"It's all right, Yvonne," he answered gently. "You mean Sébastien, don't you? He is safe."

"Safe," echoed Yvonne bewildered. "Yes, but where?"

The vicaire pointed over the sea.

"But his boat is here in the harbor?"

"Yes, but he had a sudden chance. I met him coming down to the harbor this afternoon, and he asked me to tell you because he hadn't time to go up to you." The vicaire breathed more freely. So far he had spoken the truth.

"Whom did he sail with?" questioned Yvonne, still half credulous. "None of the boats are out to-night, for what's the use? There are no fish," she added sadly.

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"No, not here, but he has gone farther, to Iceland."

"To Iceland!" she cried aghast. "To Iceland—in the *La Belle Bretonne*?"

The vicaire was silent.

"Oh, say it is not true," she pleaded, "not with those men—not in that boat."

"Why?" asked René, his heart sinking.

"Ah, you don't know them. They are not of your parish, but M. le Curé here would tell you. They are wicked men. They have never had their boat blessed, and the men tell such tales about them."

"What sort of tales?"

"Ah, Monsieur, I couldn't tell you," said Yvonne, hiding her face in her hands and suddenly bursting into tears. "They are too horrible."

"Don't cry, Yvonne," said René gently, and he could hardly refrain from laying his hand on her shoulder. "Don't cry, Sébastien can take care of himself, he is no weakling."

"No—he can't, not now," she sobbed. "He is so changed. It's been such a hard time, he has grown hard and he never goes to mass now—" and she wiped her eyes with a

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corner of her apron in the way she used to do as a child.

"But he will come back," said René, trying to comfort her, "and perhaps be a better Christian."

"No, their boat has sailed for twelve months; I heard the men on the quay saying so," and she again wiped her eyes.

Poor Yvonne! She looked so pitiful standing there, her slight figure shaken by her sobs which she was trying in vain to suppress. René could see her bosom heaving under her neatly-folded shawl. Some strange feeling seized upon him. He turned away, for he dared not look. Of love in the common meaning of the word he knew nothing. His life at the seminary had been blameless. Some instinct had always prevented the boys when René was present from giving rein to any loose talk, or jokes whose only joke lay in their double meaning; and he had grown up as innocent as a child. Sometimes as he sang the hymns before the image of Our Lady after vespers with the other boys, something stirred within him; and when alone he would stretch out his arms in yearning towards

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the Holy Mother of Pity, as the love within welled up with an overwhelming force; but he only knew love in this form: the eternal nostalgia, the heavenly homesickness, which burns the soul of the mystic as with fire.

He pulled himself together angrily. Yvonne had reminded him of the Holy Mother, with her liquid eyes, and pale oval face framed in her white coif, that was all, and in his scorn of himself he spoke almost roughly.

“Come, we can’t stay here all night. Shall I go with you to break the news to Madame le Moigne?”

But Yvonne was quick to resent the change of tone. She mastered her sobs and lifted her face to his. The tears were still trembling on her eyelashes like diamonds, and one fell splashing on to his hot hand. Furtively he lifted it to his lips and kissed the drop away, and then he felt himself blushing violently; but his back was to the light and Yvonne could not see.

“No, thank you, Monsieur. I will go alone,” and she turned and walked slowly towards the quay.

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René stood for a moment looking after her, then he turned and strode rapidly in the opposite direction, and throwing himself on his knees, he leaned his head against the side of a wooden post and wept like a child.

## CHAPTER VI

IT was very cold. The curé tried in vain to warm his hands against his bowl of coffee as he munched his hunk of gray bread, the bread they sell by the yard in Brittany. He had a book propped up in front of him, but his eyes were fixed vacantly on a portrait of a former curé of the parish which hung on the wall opposite, over the folding doors leading into the parlor. There was no cloth on the polished table, nor on the black tray which held the curé's *café complet*. He emptied the little basin which did duty for a cup, then he got up and opened the door leading into the passage.

"Jeannette," he called.

"Yes, Monsieur," came a voice from the kitchen.

"Where is Monsieur le Vicaire?"

"He told me to take his coffee up to his room when he came in from mass, but he will just have to come and fetch it for himself another morning. I haven't the time to be

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running up and down waiting on a young man like him," she continued, emerging from the kitchen wiping her hands on her blue check apron.

The curé shut the door hastily in her face. He didn't wish to enter into a conversation just then with her on the misdemeanors of his young vicaire. He could hardly put it into words, yet the curé was conscious that there was something strange about René's behavior the last few weeks. Generally he went about his tasks very quietly, seldom saying much, but working hard and spending a long time in the church—too long the practical curé used sometimes to think as he trudged wearily across his parish, half envious of his young colleague.

But in the last fortnight René's manner had changed. He was restless and excited, and had not seemed able to keep still, but was constantly seizing upon some excuse for a long tramp over the parish to visit some sick person; or else he would go down to Audierne to see what boats had come in, and if the sardines had come back, and generally to report on "la misère."

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It had always been customary at Pont-Croix for the curé and the vicaire to say each his mass at the same time at the two side altars, but René had suggested that perhaps if they were said at different times it would give the people a better chance of attending, and certainly there was much to be wished for in that respect. So the curé had said his mass as usual at six o'clock, which René had heard, before saying his half an hour later.

But was the lad only trying to avoid him, was it that which had prompted the suggestion? thought the curé sadly, as he poured out another basin of coffee. He had filled it too full, and he upset some of it down his cassock. His cassock had had many libations of soup and coffee, and the curé looked at it rather ruefully. Sometimes an inconvenient envy of his brother arose in the good man's heart. His two nieces were grown up now, and a few months ago he had gone to stay with them. "But I mustn't do it again," he said to himself, "they spoil me." He had missed all their little thoughtful attentions too much, when he had returned to his presbytère. It had been delightful to the old man to find



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his slippers warmed for him, his coffee poured out just as he liked it, his cassock brushed.

The curé got up and paced the floor. He felt annoyed with himself. Why should he grumble? Was not every one in his parish, man, woman, and child, his child too, and he their father? Did they not look to him for counsel, and did he not love them all? Ah, yes, but yet he knew that deep down in his heart there was an empty corner, which imperceptibly René had helped to fill.

The curé had been a priest too long not to know the havoc which these empty corners of the heart may make in a man's life. They had to be filled. Wasn't he trying to fill them for others every day of his life? Surely he could fill his own. He stopped his restless pacing in front of a print of the Crucifixion which hung by the door. Though crudely drawn, a great devotion inspired it, a devotion which seems lost in this more cultured age. Underneath were the words in Latin, "The heart is restless till it finds its rest in Thee."

No truer words than those were ever written, thought the curé.

And then his mind went back to René.

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What was wrong with the boy, and what was this intangible air of mystery which seemed to have risen up the last week or two? Veuve Loubert, who cleaned the church—none too well either—sighed the curé to himself, had brought him a brandy bottle she had found in the corner of the confessional.

“My one?” the curé had asked, with a twinkle in his eye.

“No,” she had answered, with a secret and mysterious air which had annoyed him. “I found it hidden away in the corner of M. le Vicaire’s confessional. I thought I had better bring it straight to you, *mon père*. Of course, I shan’t mention it to any one else.”

“Mention what?” the curé had asked drily. “Do you think M. le Vicaire drinks?”

“God forbid, *mon père*,” she answered piously, “but—”

“But what?” said the curé. “Look here,” he continued, roused to anger, “you are to say no word of this to any one. Do you understand?”

“It was the very last thing I should have said to her,” ejaculated the poor curé despairingly. “What a fool I was! Of course she

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would go at once and repeat it to every one. Dreadful woman, I oughtn't to have her to clean the church. She is a notorious scandal-monger. Oh, these *dévotés*! Why should religion, which should stand for all that is generous and charitable, make women so petty and narrow and interfering!"

Still he wished Kermarec would have been more open with him. When he told him and chaffed him a little about it, he had blushed like a child detected in a fault, and had answered him shortly, as if he resented being questioned, so that the curé did not like to ask him more directly. Besides, this dastardly murder excluded other things from his mind. I hope they will catch the scoundrel, was the good curé's wish, as he carefully brushed the crumbs from his cassock. So far they had neither identified the victim nor discovered the murderer, for things moved slowly in that little village in spite of the electric light of which they were so proud.

The vicaire's step passed the door. The curé took up his breviary. He must go and say his office. Much as he loved his granite church, he generally chose to recite his brevi-

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ary while walking up and down the narrow paths of his neatly-kept garden. The fresh air and the sky above him, with the briny smell from the tidal river which flowed below the garden wall, these were his best accompaniments to prayer. As to the vicaire, it was lucky that he preferred the church, otherwise they might get in each other's way in these narrow box-trimmed walks.

But to-day he found the vicaire impatiently striding up and down the south border. Each time he got to the end of the path, when the vicaire had his back to him, the old curé's eyes left his book, and his lips ceased to move in repetition of the psalm, as he watched him with a yearning, anxious expression. Ah, well, he thought, he will be going to Quimperlé in a few days now, to take the retreat, and it's not my business. I mustn't interfere.

But after supper that evening, as the two priests were sipping their *café noir*, the curé, turning a little redder than usual, said in as indifferent a tone as he could muster—

“By the way, Kermarec, if you want a day's leave before you go to Quimperlé, just let me know and I will try and arrange it.”

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"Thanks—no. Why should I?"

"I thought—perhaps—" said the old man hesitatingly, "that you might perhaps like to go up to Quimper first."

"Why?" asked René rather unkindly, for he knew perfectly well what was in his curé's mind.

The curé felt nettled. He looked at René full in the face as he said—

"When I take a retreat, Kermarec, I feel that I must go first, and confess my own sins, before I can hear the confessions of others."

"There are some sins a priest cannot confess," said René, as he pushed aside his cup and rose hastily.

"For instance?" asked the curé boldly, though his heart was beating fast beneath his shabby cassock.

"Those of another man," answered the vicaire shortly, as he opened the door.

## CHAPTER VII

THREE weeks had gone by and the retreat was drawing to a close. The snow was falling softly, and was nestling in the crevices of the stucco porch of the old parish church at Quimperlé, but René was hardly conscious of the cold as he crossed the square from the presbytère, on his way to the early mass. His heart was aflame with the greatness of his priestly office.

*Non sum dignus*, he murmured to himself, as he thought of the crowded church the night before, the earnest uplifted faces, and the souls who had sought from him solace, and the remission of their sins.

A few minutes later he stood with his back to the congregation, who crowded the south aisle, pleading for them the one great Sacrifice. He did not know it was the last time he should plead it for many a long day, yet, if he had, he would hardly have given that a thought, so absorbed was he in the greatest act which man has power to perform.

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His hands trembled as he raised the chalice.  
*Sanguis Domini nostri.*

To the priest it is indeed the cup of sacrifice, which he alone is permitted to drink, and that to the dregs. When he held this cup within his hands he felt strong for any sacrifice, and the prayers of the crowd of women and girls behind him seemed to be borne up to him with a strange force. The words of à Kempis floated through his mind. "As I willingly offered myself to God, my Father, for thy sins, with my hands stretched out upon the cross, and my body naked, so that nothing remained in me, which was not turned into a sacrifice for divine propitiation—even so must thou willingly offer thyself to me daily in the mass, as a pure and holy oblation, together with all thy powers and affections as heartily as thou canst . . . I seek not thy gifts but thee . . . But if thou take thy stand upon self and wilt not offer thyself freely to my will, thy offering is not perfect, nor will there be an entire union between us." In an agony of intercession René bowed himself to surrender, for only through surrender could Christ work in him for others.



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“Take me, O Christ, and do with me as Thou wilt; only if it be Thy gracious will save Sébastien and Yvonne. Take me, and break me, and then from the broken fragments of self refashion me in Thine own likeness, O Christ.”

The curé, M. Quiberon, was kneeling farther back, behind the pulpit, saying his thanksgiving after his own early mass. A well-known conductor of retreats himself, he feared his presence might make the younger priest nervous. He had purposely refrained from being present at Kermarec's addresses, but this morning he resolved to stay, for he wanted to tell his old friend at Pont-Croix what he thought of “his young saint.”

Famed throughout the diocese for his learning, the curé of Quimperlé was respected, rather than loved, by his parishioners. His cultured learning and somewhat fastidious tastes did not appeal to them. They were proud of his preaching, and listened to his sermons with a respectful but cold attention. But this morning there was a different feeling in the air, it was as if a cloud had broken. Though he did not know it, it swayed even his own mind as he listened from his hiding place,



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with a smile upon his lips, half tender and half cynical, to the rapturous outpourings of this young enthusiast. For René had returned the moment his mass was ended, only taking time to change his chasuble and alb for a short surplice. The light of his communion had not yet died away. What he said was very simple and very old. He had taken for his text the words of S. Paul, "The love of Christ constraineth us." "Our heart is corrupt, 'cœur rompu,' broken into fragments by sin. Let us then give these broken fragments to God. We should be ashamed to give them to any one else, but God will accept them and bind up our corrupt and broken hearts."

M. Quiberon waited afterwards so as to walk back with René.

"Not at all bad," he said condescendingly, "that simile of corrupt is not new of course, but you brought it out forcibly."

René blushed at the praise, yet at the same time felt irritated. He was longing to be alone by himself. His heart was bursting with love and thanksgiving, and the thought that M. Quiberon had been listening and criticizing, annoyed him.

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“If you will excuse me, *mon père*, I have left my breviary in the sacristy, I will go back and get it.

M. Quiberon arched his eyebrows, but bowed assent. He was too merciful to draw René’s attention to the fact that the gold-edged book he held in his hand was curiously like a breviary. Poor lad, he said to himself, he wants ballast, intellectual ballast. He is too sensitive, too emotional. It’s the great weakness of our church here in Brittany. What we need is intellect.

René retraced his steps, and finding the church empty, he knelt down on the altar step where he had said mass. His lips moved in unspoken prayer, as he breathed out his soul in one great offering. “O God,” he cried, “for Thy great love for me, I give myself to Thee. Take from me what Thou wilt not, give to me what Thou wilt, whether it be pain or joy, sickness or health; life or death.”

It was here that the gendarme found him half an hour later. He had discovered from the servant at the presbytère that M. le Curé had entered alone, and so not waiting for her to make further inquiries, had hurried off to

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the church; for his orders had been strict that he must bring M. Kermarec back to Rennes by the first train, and there was little time to spare. The cold had not improved his temper and he spoke roughly.

"I arrest you in the name of the law," he said, laying a hand upon René's shoulder.

The latter looked up dazed and confused.

The man started when he caught sight of the young priest's face. His eyes seemed larger and brighter for the pallor of his cheeks, and a red mark where his forehead had pressed the altar step gave him a strange look.

"I don't understand," he said.

"I have orders to arrest you in the name of the law," repeated the officer.

"But for what?"

"That you will learn in due time; and now, Monsieur, have the goodness to come with me without a fuss."

René got up, still half-dazed, and walked slowly towards the door, the gendarme following him. An icy wind met them as they opened the swing doors and crossed the porch. How peaceful it seemed! The sprinkling of snow had left the square quite white, and it

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clung to the molding over the old doorway. Towards the east a rosy flush was spreading over the sky, and a group of little children, dressed just like their mothers in close white caps and blue aprons over their black frocks, were hastening to school, the clatter of their sabots deadened by the snow.

René walked slowly as if in a dream. Soon, no doubt, would come a reaction, for these days of mental and physical strain had told on him; but for the time he seemed to be lifted out of this world, and almost sensibly in communion with the unseen. A sense of exultation possessed him, and this sudden arrest had consciously deepened the feeling. Surely God was only answering the prayer he had just prayed with so great fervor. The hour he had so often dreaded while sitting alone in his room at the presbytère at Pont-Croix, had come at last. And was he not guilty of the murder, for had he not connived at it? It was just, therefore, that he should suffer for it, and God had mercifully mitigated the pain by the knowledge that he was sheltering another. All the sting of suffering is gone, thought the young priest, when it is

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vicarious. Perhaps by his sufferings he might be allowed to fill up the sufferings of Christ, and take his share in the saving of Sébastien's soul, for still the bitter cry rang in his ears, "You are sending me to hell."

They found M. Quiberon standing at the open door of the presbytère, on the lookout for them.

"Come in, *mon ami*, come and have some hot coffee before starting."

"Where are they taking me to?" René asked, still half in a dream.

"To Rennes, to await the assizes."

"But why in such a hurry? and what is it—I don't under—" but the word died upon his lips.

M. Quiberon noticed his hesitation, but there was no diminution in the heartiness of his tone, as he said—

"We don't believe a single word of what they say, you may be sure of that, but you see they found a knife, very like the one they had been looking for, among your papers—but you have heard all about it, I expect?" he said glancing in the direction of the gendarme.

"No," answered René, "he refused to say."

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“What!” cried M. Quiberon, turning angrily to the officer of the law who stood a little apart, with a sulky expression on his face, impatient to be off, “hadn’t you the politeness to tell M. le Vicaire the absurd charge on which you have been ordered to arrest him?”

Suddenly the hot blood surged into the young priest’s face.

“I know the charge,” he said quietly.

The gendarme was watching him keenly. M. Quiberon made an impatient gesture, and was about to draw René aside, when the man interposed.

“No more of that, Monsieur,” he said roughly. “My orders were strict. I was to let no one speak with the prisoner until I brought him to——”

M. Quiberon let René’s arm drop, and faced the gendarme.

“If you don’t keep a civil tongue in your head, my good man, I shall report you to my friend, M. le Préfet. I am going down to the station to see M. Kermarec off. You can wait for us,” and tucking his arm into René’s he drew him into the house and shut the door.

## CHAPTER VIII

ON the far-off Iceland seas in that strange light which is neither of the night nor day, but a blending of both, Sébastien was fishing. He bent over the gunwale hauling in the line, hand over hand, and as the great cod was dragged up over the boat's side, unfastened the hook from its mouth, and threw it over his shoulder to his comrade behind him, who quick as thought slit the fish up with his sharp knife, cut out the guts, and laid it flattened and clean beside the pile of others waiting to be salted.

Every now and then Sébastien stretched himself to his full height to unstiffen, for his back seemed nearly breaking, and his hands were chafed and sore with the stiff wet ropes. Yet the work suited him. He breathed in great gulps of the pure air, and carried away by his sense of physical health and enjoyment, he shouted in a deep bass voice—



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“Saint Michel, Archange de paix,  
Votre puissance est sans égal,  
Ayant mis Satan à revers  
Malgrè sa femme infernale  
Nous nous prosternons devant vous.”

It was the song the pilgrims sing when they go to Mont S. Michel, and it put Sébastien in mind of days of long ago, when as a boy he had walked there on foot with his mother and Yvonne.

“Stop that,” growled a voice on his right. “The devil’s a very good comrade, and a friend of mine, and I advise you too,” he added with a sly wink, “to make your peace with him. You have need, haven’t you?”

Sébastien stopped hauling suddenly. His face looked ashen under the tan of so many weeks’ exposure to all weathers.

“What do you mean?” he asked huskily.

“Oh, no offense,” said the other with a harsh laugh.

Sébastien looked round him. Sea, nothing but sea, on every side. The soft, shining gray of the water was only broken by the brown dots of distant sails of some other Breton boats. All around was the vast emptiness of space.



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Nowhere as in these northern seas, unless it may be in the desert, does the sense of eternity take such hold of a man. It had Sébastien in its grip, although he was not conscious of it. Below, separated from him by a few planks, was the almost bottomless abyss of water; above, the great dome of transparent light called sky; while in front of him the pale white sea stretched to a far, and seemingly boundless horizon. And over all there was the silence of the polar latitudes, which has made the bravest shudder at the sound of his own voice. Here there could be no escape. Sébastien felt that at last his hour was come. He was face to face with destiny.

With shaking hands he tugged again at the rope, and with one last heave he jerked the fish on to the slimy deck. Then he turned and faced his comrade.

Pierre Leroux was looking at him with eyes full of curiosity. He was a rough hulking lad, no worse and no better than a thousand others; the product of a poor underfed mother and a half-drunken father. His better feelings had been starved, rather than destroyed, by active deeds of vice.

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As his glance fell on Sébastien's shaking hands, a rough pity seized him. After all they were bunk companions, a sacred tie with the Breton fisherman.

"Look here, *mon gâs*, I won't betray you," he said.

Sébastien let the line slip back into the water with a splash. Guillaume Corbet, the mate, was a few yards off, rubbing coarse salt over the slit cod to preserve them. He looked up from his work at the sound with an oath.

"Precious little work you two get done in a night," he called surlily.

Pierre retaliated angrily, and Sébastien bent to his task again until the oaths ceased. The bad language had jarred on him at first, but before long he found himself joining in, until his tongue had grown accustomed to rap out oaths as in the old days when, serving at mass, he had shouted the responses.

The quarrel over, Pierre took a hand with the line, bending over Sébastien so that he could hear him as Sébastien whispered—

"What did you mean?"

"Wait till we turn in. I will tell you all then, mate. That devil Corbet may overhear."

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And so on in the changeless light the two men worked on silently side by side. Up till now Sébastien had held himself aloof from the other men. They had resented it rather, but he was too useful a hand for them to quarrel with, so they let him alone, and little by little his conscience had quieted down. The good air, monotonous and hard work, and plentiful food, had steadied his nerves and dulled his thoughts. He had become little more than a healthy animal. But something in Pierre's rough sympathy had shaken him, and every now and then a great tear dropped like rain on to the gunwale. Pierre pretended not to notice and whistled softly to himself, while he kept his eyes fixed on his work.

Every quarter of an hour Sébastien and Pierre would change places, and while Pierre hauled in the line Sébastien would slit and clean the fish. They had changed twice when the mate sounded a bell, and in a few minutes the other three men who composed the crew came up on deck. They were a surly looking trio. Sleep was still in their eyes, and they were pulling up their loose trousers and buckling their belts as they slouched along. Pierre

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silently handed one of them the line, and then followed Sébastien down the hatchway to their bunks.

The cabin reeked of the smell of oil, soaked clothes, bilge water and all those nameless odors which belong to a fishing boat. The men had strong lungs, and were so accustomed to the smell that after the first whiff they hardly noticed it. They kicked off their long sea-boots and lay down in their bunks, which were not unlike the shelves of a vault. The mate had one to himself, above the wider bunk which Pierre and Sébastien shared.

They lay quite still until deep snores from over their heads showed that Corbet was fast asleep.

Sébastien drew closer to Pierre.

"Hush, don't make a noise," cautioned Pierre, "or else that fool might hear."

"What do you know?" muttered Sébastien.

It seemed that two nights before Pierre had lain awake with an open sore in his hand, into which the salt had got, and the pain kept him awake. Sébastien was sleeping rather lightly, and was talking and crying out strangely in his sleep.

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“You said things that made me feel queer,” said Pierre, “and I thought I would tell you, *mon gâs*, the next time I had a chance.”

“Did I say anything—special?” asked Sébastien lamely.

“It put me in mind of one of the commandments I learned when a boy at the Catechism; but I don’t remember which.”

“What do you mean? You must know which commandment,” said Sébastien impatiently.

Pierre chuckled.

“*Mon gâs*, I might be able to tell you the commandment, but I couldn’t tell you the number of it.”

Sébastien made as though he would get up.

“Lie still, you ass,” whispered Pierre, “I won’t blab.”

“But perhaps the others know,” and there was a frightened catch in Sébastien’s voice. The long strain, the silence, and now this sudden fear of detection seemed more than he could stand.

Pierre held him fast.

“No—before God—I’m the only one that heard you. And I reckon,” he said as if half

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to himself, "there are worse things than killing a man."

"What do you mean?" jerked out Sébastien.

"Letting a man be killed for you."

"How?"

"Well, a man doesn't murder himself. Some one will be nabbed for it, and I was just wondering who;" and Pierre, having delivered his soul turned over and was soon fast asleep.

## CHAPTER IX

TWO weeks had passed, and the day of the assizes was drawing near. Owing to Monsieur Quiberon's influence the vicaire had been given a room apart from the other prisoners in the Governor's house. It was a room sometimes reserved for prisoners on remand, a bare, comfortless place with windows high in the wall, so that it was impossible to see out of them. But René was very grateful for this concession, and it was in vain that both his own curé and Monsieur Quiberon pleaded to stand bail for him. No, he said, he wanted quiet and time to think and (but this reason he kept to himself) he preferred to be quite alone, where he could have no fear of betraying Sébastien by any chance word or look.

These at least were his feelings for the first few days, and now, though the time hung heavily, he was too proud to retract. At first they had offered him newspapers, but he had refused them. The world seemed so remote.

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He had no wish to know what others were doing; but remembering that, as a boy, he had learned to net, he asked for twine and a mesh and needle. The manual work had seemed a relief to his tired brain.

So between netting and the recital of his breviary, the hours slowly passed. At first they had seemed very long, but the monotony of routine is in itself a powerful killer of time. He learned to spend longer and longer over his daily repetition of the psalms, dwelling on each verse lovingly and lingeringly; bringing out fresh meanings from the well-known words and weaving them into chaplets of intercessory prayer.

He had been allowed a few visitors. The old curé had come post haste and bristling with rage as soon as he heard of his arrest, but finding René so passive and content he had gone home, humiliated with himself at his restless impatience.

But the presbytère seemed very empty to the old man now, and he could hardly rouse himself to take interest in the daily duties of his parish. The children in the Catechism soon discovered this, and found they could



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indulge in many little diversions and games which some time back would have been promptly detected, and as promptly punished. The women sitting at their doors sewing would look up for the old friendly greeting from their curé as he passed, but often in vain. Not that he willingly ignored them, or neglected any urgent duty, but a heavy weight seemed to be crushing down his spirits. His old light-heartedness was gone. Before, he had eyes for everything, and a greeting for all, but now he walked with bent head and saw only what lay exactly in his path.

“M. le Curé ought to get another young priest to help him,” Madame Guillaume remarked to her neighbor, as she shook out the crumbs from her tablecloth in the doorway of the Inn.

But that was the last thing the curé thought of doing. Every day he expected to see René come walking in, sitting opposite to him again at meals, startling him by some unexpected question. Perhaps he *was* there, up in his room, bending over his desk and absorbed in his books. Sometimes, even, he would creep softly upstairs so that Jeannette should not

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hear him, and open René's door gently. How empty and desolate it seemed. Everything had been put neatly away by Jeannette. It struck a chill to the old man's heart. He would take down a book or two, and turn the pages, hoping to find a mark against some favorite passage which might let him into the secrets of René's mind. But René had sent for the books which he had cherished most, or taken them with him; and the nail on which his crucifix had hung was empty.

But his prie-dieu was still there, and a little awkwardly the curé knelt down, upsetting a paper-weight with the sleeve of his cassock. It made such a noise that he feared Jeannette would hear, as indeed she did, and she clattered her pans angrily, muttering to herself.

"Why can't he leave that boy alone? He's worth six of Monsieur René, the old saint!" But none the less she gave Monsieur le Curé a piece of her mind as she waited on him at déjeuner.

"Going and catching your death of cold in that room which hasn't had a scrap of fire in it for months, and me wasting all my time

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trying to get the stove nice and hot for you in here."

"I'm sorry," said the curé meekly.

"Sorry! There's not much use in being sorry. Just you eat this," and she set down a large bowl of hot bouillon in front of him.

In spite of his calm air, René had really been a good deal upset by the curé's last visit. He could see that the old man was missing him, and he tried in vain to get him to ask the Bishop for another vicaire, but he pooh-poohed the idea.

"Why, you will be free yourself in another week or two; besides, I don't think I should want any one in your place, even if it was longer."

"Even," thought René sadly. "How shall I ever break it to him!"

It had taken him much more effort than usual and much prayer to attune himself to the quiet routine of prison-life after that visit. He had mapped the day into hours, so that it might drag less heavily. He looked at his watch, and found it was just three o'clock, the time he had set apart for nones, and he was just opening his breviary when a knock

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came at the door, and without waiting for any answer he heard the key turned in the lock.

“Someone to see you,” said the gruff voice of the governor’s servant.

René rose, and could hardly restrain a cry of surprise. For there, standing hesitatingly in the doorway, was Yvonne. She looked pale, and the bright touch of color about her dress was gone.

“What has happened?” he exclaimed.

“Hasn’t Monsieur, then, heard?”

“I’ve heard nothing—but sit down,” for she was panting and looked as if she were ready to drop with fatigue. “Here,” and he gave her one of the two wooden chairs the room possessed and took the other himself. “Tell me all about it.”

Yvonne had a long story to tell, and it came out disjointedly, in answer to René’s questions. A week ago some planks had been washed ashore at *La pointe de Raz* with the name of the *La Belle Bretonne* painted on one of them, at least the word “La” could be easily distinguished, and a capital B. So much René discovered. No other sign of the

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boat could be found, and it was feared she had gone down off the rocks while making for the harbor. They had searched for some days, and had found the body of a fisherman washed ashore in a crevice of the cliff. And here Yvonne had utterly broken down, and it was only with much gentle questioning that René had at last gathered that she had been asked to go and identify the body as Sébastien's.

The funeral had been yesterday, and she felt she could not rest until she had come and seen Monsieur le Vicaire. But she thought he would have known of it by now. Had he not received M. le Curé's letter?

"No, they have given me no letters."

"Ah, how angry M. le Curé will be."

"And he is dead." René repeated the words softly as if to himself. Yvonne's face was still hidden in her apron, and she never saw the expression of relief that passed over the vicaire's face.

"Ah, Monsieur," and her voice broke with her tears, "do you think he will be saved? Will the holy virgin pray for him? He never went to mass. He hadn't been to mass on

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Sunday for a long time, and I don't think he made his confession, not since last Easter."

"Yes," said the vicaire quietly, "he did. I confessed him just before he sailed in *La Belle Bretonne*."

"Ah, then, Monsieur, you gave him absolution, and *le bon Dieu* will have mercy on him and pardon him."

René turned his face away to hide the pain in it.

"The good God is very merciful," he said.

Yvonne's pale face had grown very sad. Could she tell Monsieur le Vicaire her secret? Perhaps he had guessed it. Her lips grew dry as she tried to frame the words, but she could not utter them aloud.

Afterwards Yvonne said how wonderfully M. le Vicaire had spoken to her, and what beautiful things he had said about the love of God; but he himself hardly knew what he had said. It was with a sense of physical relief that he heard the key turn in the lock, and the servant's harsh voice calling that the time was up and Mademoiselle must go. After letting her out he staggered back to his chair,

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and laying his head upon the wooden table buried his face in his hands.

Free! Free! The word echoed and re-echoed in his brain as scene after scene flashed before him—the waves sweeping up the bay at Audierne, the crisp smell of the sea and the salt seaweed; the golden patches on the stretch of the heath when the gorse was in bloom. How he longed to see it all again! Ah, and his church, and his eyes filled with tears at the thought of the lady chapel with the lamp burning dimly in the half darkness, flickering on the great arches of the aisle; and the little children clattering in, hand in hand, to say their evening prayers.

Oh, the joy of striding once more across the hill, and looking down on the brown sails trailing on the sea like sprays of Virginia creeper; or of roaming down by the harbor, watching the boats come in and listening to the flap of the water against the piles of the wooden jetty!

Only those who have been locked up in one small room day after day can value the overwhelming sense of joy which the thought of freedom brings.

He got up and paced up and down the room



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like a caged beast. He had, he feared, almost betrayed his delight to Yvonne. Yvonne! Mon Dieu! What would it mean to her? Yvonne, repeated a mocking voice at his side. What is she to you?

"Nothing, nothing," he cried out aloud; and then he pressed his hands to his head. He wanted to keep something still that seemed to be throbbing there like a steam piston. What were all these voices that he heard hissing round him like snakes? He must collect his thoughts. Sébastien was dead. Then of course he was free. No one could expect him to sacrifice himself for the sake of a dead man. Who ever heard of anything so silly? He felt weak, physically weak. He must have air.

He staggered up against the table, almost falling over it. Then he raised himself upright, and supporting himself by the back of a chair managed to get as far as the door. He tried the handle. Why, of course—he had forgotten—it was locked. He wasn't free after all!

He gave one great cry, and fell heavily with his face towards the door.



## CHAPTER X

THE trial had had to be delayed because of the prisoner's illness. A bad nervous breakdown was the doctor's verdict, just saved from brain fever by taking it in time; and a very bad subject too, he added.

The curé had come up at once on hearing of René's illness, and had rated the governor soundly for his carelessness in not giving his letter to the vicaire. The governor had treated him with respect ever since. He was a kind man at heart, and many little comforts had found their way into the room, for, as quiet was essential, René had not been moved to the infirmary. It was a bare room, with windows placed high up the wall, but the governor had added an armchair, and a strip of carpet to make it more homelike; and knowing René's love for flowers, the old curé had gone out to the market and brought in a large bunch of violets and early snowdrops, which at the present moment he was finding some difficulty in arranging.

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"Let me do it," said René watching his fumbling fingers with a look of affection in his eyes.

The curé brought them over to the bedside.

"Well, I believe you would be better at it than I am," he said rather regretfully.

René held them caressingly in his hands and sniffed up the fresh clean smell of the earth that always seems to cling to snowdrops, while the curé drew the empty armchair up to the head of the bed.

"The doctor thinks you would be better if we moved you out of this. Won't you let me engage a room for you at Madame Fauve's? I can easily arrange it with the governor, for the doctor would give you a certificate."

"No, please don't," said René anxiously. "I had far rather stay here," and he looked round at the bare walls. "It's rather like a monk's cell, isn't it?" and the curé caught a wistful tone in his voice.

"Well, well, my boy, as you will," he said soothingly, for he saw René flush up and look excited, "but now you must rest, for I wrote to Monsieur de Lorges, and he is coming to see you this afternoon."

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René looked up with a grateful smile. He had been wishing ever since he had been taken ill to see the Canon of Quimper.

“That was very good of you,” he said.

“Well, then, you must sleep a little now. I shan’t disturb you,” and the old man took his breviary out of his pocket.

René obediently closed his eyes. He was glad not to talk. Very soon he heard the curé breathing heavily. “Dear old man,” he thought affectionately, “how good he has been to me,” and he raised his head so that he could see him better. His book had dropped from his hand and he was sleeping peacefully as a child, and there was something which reminded René of a child in his expression—a look of happiness and innocence. “And yet, though I love him so, I could never consult him or ask his advise about this,” thought René, as once again he went over in his mind the question he wished to put to his confessor. Surely there could be only one answer. If a man is dead he cannot be punished. Then why not let the truth be known? There could be no object in shielding a dead man.

Yet, supposing he had done his duty and

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persuaded Sébastien to give himself up to justice, he wouldn't have been drowned then, and he would have had a chance of repentance. Had he indeed sent him to hell, as Sébastien had said? How much he was to blame! He should have left it to God. How often we try to manage for God, and how bitterly we are made to repent it afterwards! And Yvonne? How would she look if she knew that the man she had loved and trusted was a murderer? No—that was not the right word—no one could call a sudden act like that murder. Yes, said another voice, it was murder. He killed a man, and you are to blame for not helping him to do the only right thing and make amends, and therefore you must suffer for him. . . .

The old thoughts went on revolving in his mind in the old grooves they had made for themselves. Would they never let him rest? Well, at least, he would try and quiet them with prayer—and so, repeating the long office psalm, he fell asleep.

It was three o'clock before M. le Chanoine de Quimper arrived. He was an older man than the curé of Pont-Croix, but he carried

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his years well. His had been a life of study and contemplation, rather than of active work. He was upright and of a spare figure, and had the white, pale complexion of the ascetic and student, while the curé's face was reddened and lined by exposure to all weathers as he tramped over his scattered parish. The rules of practical common-sense and charity were enough for him, a poor curé, he used to say, deceiving himself but not others.

The face of M.<sup>lle</sup> Lorges was radiant with some inner brightness. He seemed to light up the bare room as he entered, with a light which often shines through those who strive to attain to some vision beyond the view of ordinary men.

The curé felt humbled in the presence of this saintly priest; yet, had he but known it, the only thought in the mind of the older man, as he looked at the lines of tenderness which curved round the curé's mouth and eyes, was of One who went about doing good.

After a civil word of welcome, M. Sévigny excused himself, and René was left alone with the canon.

He purposely did not ask the question

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which was torturing him until after he had made his confession and received absolution. For there was to René something so sacred in that sacrament where, as he believed, he lay at the very foot of the cross, so near that the precious blood of Christ dropped upon him, cleansing him from the stain of his sins, that he dare not at that moment let the things temporal and seen obtrude themselves upon the things eternal and unseen. The Sacrament of Penance was to him as a sanctuary, a hiding-place in the heart of God, and no craft of man or malice of Satan must disturb that *solitude à deux*.

So it was afterwards he asked his confessor the question which had been chasing itself round and round in his brain for so many days like a treadmill: Could it be right for a man to sacrifice himself, imperil his life, or at least his liberty, for the sake of one who was dead?

There was silence in the little room for a few moments. Then Monsieur de Lorges began, inconsequently, as it seemed to René, to talk of the curé.

“Do you know his name for you?”

“No,” said René rather irritably.

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“My young saint.”

A quiver crossed René’s sensitive lips.

“You mean?” and his voice trembled.

“I mean—that there is something dearer than liberty.”

“And that?”

“Is honor—your honor, God’s honor.”

René turned impatiently away. In spite of his highly-strung and sensitive temperament he possessed a strong vein of practical common-sense. For the moment it seemed to him foolish absurdity to sacrifice himself for a mere sentiment—to save a dead man’s reputation. Men weren’t called upon to do that sort of thing in ordinary life. It was quixotic and ridiculous.

Monsieur de Lorges sat with his hands folded, motionless. His lips were moving, but he did not speak. There was a tense silence in the room, the silence of thought. Far off the noise of a cart rattling over the cobbled street could be heard. Then the old priest moved slightly, and let his hands drop apart. There was no hesitation in his manner, nothing to show the struggle that had been taking place in his mind a few min-



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utes before. For what was he to preach to this boy—René seemed to him little more—so infinitely better and holier than he was himself? The burden of sin and weariness and sorrow weighs on none so heavily as on the priest who must raise others up to duties and sacrifices in which he himself has failed. Yet it is just because of past failures that the gift is theirs to touch some chord which vibrates in the heart of another, and strengthens him for sacrifice.

“My son,” he said, “I have no right to advise you to do this thing, because once when the choice—God’s opportunity—came to me, and I saw a way by which I could have saved another from the result of the sin, I was a coward, I let the chance slip.” The old man’s voice faltered for a moment, then he added firmly, “and in my case there was sin. And yours there is no question of doing wrong to avoid imprisonment, not at least as far as you have told me, perhaps to avoid something worse than imprisonment—perhaps—” and his voice faltered—

“Yes, yes, *mon père*, go on; I understand.”

“You have but to mention the dead man’s



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name—is it not so?—to exonerate yourself. And the stain would only fall upon the dead man, or has he relations or near friends upon whom the shame would fall?” M. de Lorges fixed his keen eyes upon René.

“He has his mother—and—” René hesitated.

“Has he a wife?” asked the canon gently.

“No, they were only betrothed.”

“And if you were wrongfully condemned, you have whom?”

“I have no near relations left, *mon père*,” said René sadly.

“And this girl, is she young?” asked Monsieur de Lorges.

René’s face was flushed. His eyes were bright. The old priest looked at him anxiously.

“Don’t you think we should talk of this some other time?”

“No, *mon père*, it must be settled. It’s torturing me. I want your help. Tell me what you would do.”

Monsieur de Lorges got up and walked to the window. His mouth quivered. He knew more than René guessed, for the whole neigh-

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borhood was full of the crime, and things had come to his ears of which René in his secluded cell was ignorant. Yet what was he to advise?

“There is no one besides the mother and the girl?” he asked in a low voice.

“No,” said René wonderingly. “Only the girl——”

“When did you last see her?” asked M. de Lorges.

“A few weeks ago, before I got ill, *mon père*. She came to see me here.”

“To see you here?” echoed the canon.

“Yes, she was in trouble.”

“About what? Tell me all you know, *mon fils*.”

René’s brow puckered.

“But I can’t, *mon père*. It was only that she was troubled because her”—René hesitated for a word—“her friend had been drowned.”

“You mean Sébastien le Moyne?”

René raised himself up in bed.

“You know all about it, *mon père*? Then I needn’t try to screen him. But how did you know?”

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"It needed no genius to put two and two together, *mon fils*. But don't distress yourself," he added hastily, as he saw René's look of consternation, "I shall consider everything you tell me here as inviolable and under the seal of confession. So don't be afraid of speaking. What did she tell you—this girl? Did she say anything about"—and the old man's voice hesitated.

"About what?" asked René with a frown of perplexity.

"She is soon to be a mother," said the priest gently.

"Yvonne! A mother!"—the name escaped from him in his astonishment—"What do you mean? No, it's not true. It can't be true."

"It's usually the man one must blame," and the priest's lips quivered again painfully.

René started up from his pillow.

"The scoundrel," he exclaimed. "I won't shield him a moment longer."

"And Yvonne? Shall her child grow up to be pointed at as the child of a murderer?"

René fell back exhausted. The outburst had been too much for him. Besides, what

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was the use of struggling, or of asking advice? Wasn't it clear that, dead or alive, he could not divulge the sin of one who had confessed to him, even though M. de Lorges had guessed?

"Tell me, *mon père*," he said faintly, "what I must do. It's true I can't tell anything I have heard in this man's confession or give any clue, but you have guessed, others will guess. Can't I let things take their course? Tell me what I must do?"

"*Mon Dieu*," said the old priest under his breath, "he asks me—the sinner?"

René, thinking he had not heard, wearily repeated the question.

Monsieur de Lorges rose from his chair with an effort and stood beside the bed, laying his hand upon René's.

"You know, *mon fils*, what you must do. There is only one royal road, the one which your King took," and he pointed to a crucifix which hung at the foot of the bed.

René looked up. It was a carved wooden crucifix which a friend had once brought him from Oberammergau. The light from the high window above cast a shadow on it, so

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that the hands, though still fast to the cross, yet seemed to turn downwards. To René's hyper-sensitive mind it seemed a sign of recognition and forgiveness, as if his penitence had unloosed those pierced hands. Love had bound them there so only love could set them free. The closed eyes seemed to open and look down upon René. He felt a glow of joy and peace invade him, refreshing his heart and mind, as the sea at high tide comes flowing in over the ooze and slimy seaweed, bringing life and beauty once again.

M. de Lorges glanced at René's face. He saw there was no further need for speech, so he knelt down silently by the bed and offered up a thanksgiving.

When the curé of Pont-Croix returned a few minutes later, he found René much exhausted, and Monsieur de Lorges on the point of going.

"I hope you haven't worn out my patient," he said with an anxious look at René.

"It's the fatigue of victory," answered the other, laying his hand in blessing on René's head.

"Bother victory," muttered the curé in a

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voice which he hoped was not too low for the canon to catch.

The latter turned to him smiling, with outstretched hand.

“Be sure to let me know if I can be of any good to either you or M. Kermarec.”

René’s eyes were still fixed on the crucifix! The curé closed the door on Monsieur le Chanoine with undisguised annoyance.

“What a fool I was to let him come. It’s these meddling saints that upset the world so.” For the look on René’s face filled the old man’s eyes with tears.

## CHAPTER XI

IT was a wonderful scene. The sharp peaks of the Westmann Islands, which at sunset seem to cut the sky, were softened and blended by the filmy mist of dawn, and melted into the opal-tinted horizon. Beyond the flat coast-line of Iceland the huge outlines of the Lang Jökull could be dimly seen; and eastward, blushing under the first touch of the sun, shone the peaks of the Vatna and Esja Jökulls. All nature seemed to be hidden under a veil of purity, and nature, bearing the outward sign of the invisible, in such a mood unconsciously acts with a sacramental force. Nor is it only upon those whose hearts and eyes are sensitive to beauty that she so works, but also, upon those who understand or care for none of these things, she yet exercises an unknown force.

Thus, little as Sébastien realized it, she was weaving her spell over him. As he lifted his eyes, still heavy with sleep and with mental pain, to the pure sky and let the cold piercing

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air fill his lungs, he felt somehow morally braver. Never before had he gone through such a time of mental strain and worry as in the last few weeks. Some days ago a boat had come to the Breton fleet with letters, but there were none for the crew of *La Belle Bretonne*; however, the day after they saw a boat bearing down upon them and making signals; and when they had hauled in their nets, and she had got alongside, a lad from Pont-Croix, a friend of Pierre's, had come on board.

He told them a most extraordinary story. Every one in Pont-Croix believed them to be drowned, for parts of a boat had been picked up with their name on it, and the body of one of their crew had been washed ashore.

"And they have had a service in the church for us," cried Pierre, the tears running down his cheeks from laughter, "and they have buried one of us, too!"

"Which?" asked Sébastien shortly.

"You, old chap," Pierre answered, slapping his thigh with amusement. "Good end for you, too. Better than being transported, eh?" and he winked knowingly.

Sébastien put his finger on his lips.



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"Mate's there," he whispered.

"Sorry, old chap, but *Sacré Christ!* can't you imagine it all? The curé holding up us as a warning to all the righteous, and picturing you in the torments of hell, as Père Joseph did at the Mission!"

"Stop it," cried Sébastien with an oath, and seizing a rope he began hauling it in to hide the trembling of his hands.

In hell! Great God, wasn't he there already? How his thoughts tortured him! If they really believed him to be dead, couldn't he just drop out of their lives, give them the slip at some island where they put in for provisions? It would be easy enough to disappear. And then again better impulses drove out these selfish thoughts. There was his mother, and Yvonne, he was forgetting them. What could they do all alone? Yvonne whom he had so grieved by his impetuosity. He remembered how he had comforted her, promising her to go the curé and make it all right, so many months ago now he hardly dare count them. What was happening to Yvonne now? Was she already compromised? Were the neighbors already talking? Ah! no, he

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must go home. He must put things right for her. He mustn't leave her alone to bear the brunt of his rashness. No stain must rest on her.

Thinking these things a great eagerness seized him to get back. He was earning good money now. They had done well, and when the shares were divided he would have quite a little sum with which to begin again; and what a wedding they would have—unless—but no, he thrust the thought from him. Yvonne! dear little Yvonne! and he pictured her sweet grave face under her white coif like some saint. *Ma foi*, why had he never thought of it before? For all the world like the little statue of *la Sainte Vierge*, which hung against the central beam in the stuffy little cabin below, to keep off evil luck.

Suddenly the mate's voice rang out sharply, scattering his dreams.

"Sound there, le Moigne."

Sébastien looked up from his work. The boat was skirting the steep cliff of the outermost of the Westmann Islands. There was a channel between two detached rocks which rose sheer out of the water like a gigantic wall,

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but it needed careful steering to keep free of the hidden reefs below. The top crest of the rocks were white with gulls and puffins, and as the wind caught the sails of their boat and it scudded through, cutting the water swiftly like a sharp knife, the sudden swish of the waves frightened them, and they rose with angry cries, flapping their wings, and filling the air with a sound that seemed almost deafening amidst the intense silence that had preceded.

"It looks as if a feather-bed had burst," cried Pierre merrily, pointing up above their heads at the circling gulls.

"And the noise is like what my missus makes when she beats the linen by the river side," joined in Antoine.

"Your missus!" snarled the mate, "I bet she never did a decent day's washing in her life."

Antoine turned angrily on the elder man, but he had no defense ready, for his wife was a byword for all that was slatternly in Pont-Croix; and an awkward corner round which he must steer took his attention.

"I'll settle that with you later," he shouted,

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as the boat just cleared an outlying crag—so closely as almost to scrape it, and then a sudden jerk of the helm, and they had rounded the corner, and found themselves in a small natural cove. A little fleet of whalers were tossing up and down on the waves, and beside them, almost as big as the boats themselves, were the carcasses of six great whales, floating bellies upward; and round them screamed and circled flocks of sea-gulls. Sébastien turned away in disgust, for there was something repellant in those flabby masses of shapeless white flesh. His eyes rested with a sense of comfort on the narrow strip of green shore which edged the bay, all the greener against the black cliffs which overhung it, and which rose sharply out of the blue water. For nowhere does the grass seem greener, or the sea bluer, or the rocks blacker than in Iceland.

They dropped anchor, and soon a small boat put off from shore and rowed up to them, the men shouting and making signs, and holding up long loaves of sticky rye bread, baskets of plovers' eggs, onions and potatoes. Pierre was deputed to do the bargaining, or rather he gave an Iclander a handful of

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coins, from which, after some calculation and discussion with his companion, he subtracted two *kronur*, and handed the rest back to Pierre.

“Honest beggars!” said Pierre in Breton with a smile, to which the other responded by grasping his hand, saying—

“*Thakki mjok.*”

Pierre beamed on them again. “Seem pleased, don’t they? Let’s get some more of those eggs, they are only a mouthful. I declare I could eat twenty straight off.”

That evening they all made merry in their stuffy, murky cabin. The air was so thick you could have cut it with a knife. To the usual suffocating stench of bilge water, paraffin and stale tobacco, was added the smell of broiled fish, onions, and garlic. But their lungs were strong and they took no heed, though the air grew thicker and thicker, and the meal over, they lit their pipes.

“Let’s have a song,” called the mate.

“Yes,” chimed in Pierre, “sing your song, Antoine.”

“Which one?”

“*Les Fillettes de Paimpol.*”

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"But that's a girl's song."

"Never mind, let's have it. We'll all join in the chorus, eh, Sébastien," and Pierre gave him a dig in the ribs to wake him up, for Sébastien had almost dropped asleep over his pipe.

So Antoine in his gruff voice began the song which the girls at Paimpol sing in the evenings as they watch for the boats returning.

"Mon mari vient de partir  
Pour la pêche d'Islande, mon mari vient de partir,  
Il m'a laissée sans le sou,  
Mais . . . trala, trala, la lou . . . !  
J'en gagne!  
J'en gagne!"

Sébastien's thoughts fled to Yvonne again.

"Il, m'a laissée sans le sou."

Poor little Yvonne!

Their voices once unloosed, other songs followed, and they shouted the chorus to the beating of their feet and the thumping of their tin mugs on the bare board. The mate, who had in his day been precentor in his village church at Tréboul, every now and then broke

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in with the chant of a psalm, or a hymn to Our Lady, and the others joined in, humming the familiar tunes though not knowing the Latin words.

Presently they grew drowsy. Pierre's head dropped on his arms, and terrific snores shook the boards of the trestle table.

"We'd better turn in, lads," said the mate, "for to-morrow we are starting homewards."

"To-morrow. Hurrah!" cried Antoine.

"To-morrow," echoed Sébastien in surprise. "I thought we had sailed for a year."

The mate removed his pipe from his mouth and looked at Sébastien out of his hard gray eyes. Was he going to have trouble with this man? He didn't know him as he knew the others, and he had no liking for him either. Well, he had the majority on his side. Antoine was eager to get back to his good-for-nothing wife, Pierre was betrothed to a girl in Andierne and the boy Yann didn't count.

"Look here, le Moigne," he said gruffly, "I don't want any trouble here. I've got to get back sooner than I expected, that's all. I don't mean to tell you or any one why. But if you make any trouble, I will make trouble



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for you," he hinted darkly, closely watching Sébastien's face; for he had thought for long that there was something strange which had made this man join on so suddenly.

"It will take us a month to get back?" queried Sébastien.

"Yes, the best part of one."

Sébastien's brow puckered. In a month then he would have to come to some decision.

The boat gave a sudden jerk. The wind had risen, and it was straining against the anchor.

The mate climbed up a step or two of the ladder leading to the deck, and put his head out of the hatchway.

"The wind's freshening up a bit. We had better turn her now, lads. All hands on deck."

Pierre stirred uneasily, and awoke with a start.

"What's the row? Have we struck a rock?"

"No, sleepy head," called Antoine laughing, as he scrambled up the hatchway, "we're striking anchor."

"Hurrah!" cried Pierre pulling his jersey over his head, and picking up his pipe which had dropped out of his mouth while he slept.



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For the next ten minutes the silence was broken by the flapping of canvas against the wind, the straining of ropes round the hawsers, and the gruff voice of the mate giving orders.

"I'll take first watch," volunteered Sébastien.

"Keep her well out," said the mate, "long reefs stretch out from those isles to the larboard."

"Funny chap, that le Moigne," he thought to himself as he turned in. "I had an idea he didn't want to get home, but he seems keen enough on it."

Sébastien was glad to be left alone at the wheel, for there was only Yann on deck. Yann was a taciturn dreamy fellow, he served to emphasize the solitude rather than disturb it, as a chair serves to enhance the greatness in some picture of vast cathedral. Sébastien felt pulled in all directions; there was the thought of Yvonne driving him home, yet a dreadful fear in his heart which turned him cold dragged him back ; and slowly beginning to emerge from out of the conflict a voice he hardly recognized at first, it seemed so distant and low, urged him to play the man and be

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brave, and take the consequences of his deed upon his own shoulders; for someone must bear the punishment.

Sébastien tried to recall what he had said in those terrible moments in the confessional, and what René had said to him; but everything was blurred and dim. Only René's face rose before him clearly, so that it seemed as if he actually saw him; René the weakling he had teased as a boy; René the young *kloarek* in his cassock, coming home to visit his mother; and René the priest, with the power of absolving him. He couldn't get away from his eyes, those eyes which looked into far spaces. What would René do if he returned? If he confessed again, would he absolve him? As to many a Breton peasant, the church stood to Sébastien as a great and terrible power; and he feared the priest as the dispenser of that power. Over this great force was set God, the Almighty, who had the keys of heaven and hell. Our Lady and the Saints alone were his friends. They were there to intercede with this omnipotent God. Long ago, as a boy in the Catechism, God had meant to him something different: a tender loving Father. But it was

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as if the tender outlines of the face of Christ had been blurred, and rubbed out, by a life of sin and carelessness. Only the eyes remained: eyes which were always fixed upon him—pursuing him with a relentless scrutiny. If he had but lifted his face to those eyes he would have found Love still shining there, but it needs a brave spirit to dare to look into the eyes of God.

Sébastien looked out upon the silent sea. It was near midnight, but the sun had not long set; bars of crimson still flecked the sky, and would hardly die away ere the glow heralding the approach of another day would ripple over the waves. For in that northern latitude the sun sleeps but to wake; sets, to rise again not far from where it sank. The moon still rode high, dodging the clouds. It was a wilderness of beauty through which the little boat with its brown sails was wafted, like an autumnal leaf upon the gray ocean.

What did he matter—he, Sébastien le Moigne—in the vast solitude? Who cared for him? Yvonne? Yes, she loved him still, and he whispered her name across the waves, as if in prayer.

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At the same moment René, with eyes so dim that they could scarcely see the crucifix, and with dry, twisted lips, muttered the same name—"Yvonne," and with it found the strength to make his great resolve. Is there any greater test of love in the world than sacrifice?

## CHAPTER XII

AT last the day of the assizes had come. The court was crowded and was close to suffocation. Several small cases had been cleared off and a tense silence seized the expectant people as the Clerk read out—

*Le Crime de Pont-Croix*; the assassination of an English Captain.

The President ordered the prisoner to be brought in.

Immediately there was a flutter in the densely packed crowd. Those standing raised themselves on tiptoe the better to see, those sitting stood, and a confused murmur of whispering arose, like the sound the waves make against a pebbly beach.

“Silence,” ordered the President.

René appeared in the dock. He was very pale, but he held himself upright and his step was firm. The sun from an uncurtained window streamed down upon him.

Again a ripple of sound stirred the packed

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mass of people, in which scorn and pity seemed to strive together.

The President again called them sternly to order.

"If there is the slightest interruption I shall order the court to be cleared," he cried. Then he addressed René.

"Your full name?"

"René Jean-Baptiste Kermarec, Monsieur le Président."

"Your age?"

"Thirty-three, Monsieur le Président."

"Profession?"

René instinctively glanced down at his cassock which looked very green and worn in the brilliant sunshine.

"A priest, Monsieur le Président," he answered gravely.

Someone laughed ironically.

"Remove that person," said the President.

The curé, hidden away in a corner, and trying to efface himself so as not to make René more nervous, smiled as he said to himself, "Thank God, the President appears to be fair-minded."

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“Be seated,” said the President to René, “while you hear the charge against you.”

In a low monotonous tone the Greffier read out the Act of Accusation.

Then the Procureur Général, M. Pichon, in an impassive, expressionless voice, described the crime in more detail ; when and where it had taken place, the trampled state of the ground, the money scattered in the ditch, the finding of the body of the Englishman lying face downwards on the road ; and then he read out a list of the witnesses which were to be cited.

René was not listening. His eyes were scanning the sea of faces, trying to discover the curé. He found him at last, hidden in a corner, and noticed several others of his friends. M. Quiberon, the Curé of Quimperlé, was there, and standing, pressed about by the crowd, he saw the clear-cut saintly features of M. de Lorges. René wished they would give him a seat, he looked so tired. How good it was of him to come so far. He was sure the old priest was praying for him. Perhaps that was why he felt so curiously aloof from everything. It was as if some dream was taking

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place before his eyes; in which he had hardly any concern. Many times, in thought, he had gone through the shame and the pain of the trial, but now that it had actually come he felt nothing save a curious consciousness of exaltation, as if he were being actually raised above all that surrounded him. The crucifix had not yet been removed from the French Courts of Justice, and René's eyes sought it with a feeling of intense relief and comfort. Here at least was One who knew the truth and would stand by and comfort him; One who had deliberately laid down His life for the guilty.

The joy of sacrifice shone in René's eyes. It was almost true to say that at that moment he wanted to be condemned for a crime the thought of which had filled him with loathing and horror.

M. Pichon's voice had ceased. The charge was finished, though René had not heard one word of it. At a sign from the President, he rose.

"M. Kermarec," said the President, addressing him, "you must be ready to answer clearly and fully, and I need not add truth-



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fully, every question which is asked you with my permission."

René bowed assent.

"Swear in the prisoner," said the President.

A clerk stepped forward, and René raised his right hand, extending, as is the custom, the first and third finger. It almost seemed to him as if he were blessing the row of black-coated men seated in front of him. He repeated the formula after the clerk in a clear low voice which penetrated through the silence of the court, over which a hush of suspense hung: "I swear to speak without hate, nor fear, and to say all the truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God and the Saints."

Then the President fixed his gaze on René. His eyes were of a light, inscrutable gray, which seemed to have no feeling in them; expressionless rather than hard. They fascinated René as the eyes of a basilisk fascinates its prey.

"I understand," he said, "that so far you have refused to answer any interrogations that have been put to you during the instruction. Is that so?"

"Yes, Monsieur le Président, that is so."

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“And wherefore?”

“Because, Monsieur le Président, I am innocent.”

“But you knew of the crime?”

“Yes, Monsieur le Président, as we all knew—*after* it had been committed.”

Below the President's desk was a small table covered with red baize on which were lying an open pocket-knife, and some coins, English and French.

The President signed to the Procureur Général, saying aside to him: “You had better begin your examination. The time is getting on, and I have an engagement to lunch.”

M. Pichon rose and picked up the knife from the table.

“Is this your knife?” he asked in a careless voice, handing it to René.

“No, it is not, Monsieur le Procureur Général.”

“How was it then among your papers?”

“I found it, Monsieur le Procureur Général.”

“Where?”

“On the road to Audierne, Monsieur le Procureur Général.”

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“When did you find it? Perhaps you will be pleased to explain.”

René racked his brains to try and remember the cautions he had received from his counsel, who, at the curé’s request, had visited him in prison. He had carefully instructed him what he was to say and what not, but now all this good advice vanished from his mind, which seemed a blank. He had best tell them exactly what had happened.

“When did you find it?” repeated M. Pichon.

“In the evening after the boat had sailed, Monsieur le Procureur Général.”

“And may I ask why you were walking to Audierne so late in the evening?”

“I wanted to find——” began René, and then he stopped helplessly.

“May I ask,” continued M. Pichon, in his smooth impassive voice, “what it was you wanted to find? Was it by any chance that knife which you have in your hand?”

“Yes, Monseieur le Procureur Général, it was this knife,” answered René examining it absent-mindedly.

“But I understood you to say just now

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that it is not your knife," said M. Pichon arching his eyebrows.

"No, it was not—I mean it is not."

"And yet you went back a long way after dusk in order to look for a knife belonging to someone else," remarked M. Pichon in a soft voice, which reminded René of the purring of a cat.

René blushed in confusion. The curé from his corner coughed as loudly as he dared, in warning. "What is the boy doing?" he thought nervously.

"It seems to me a little strange, Monsieur l'Accusé," continued M. Pichon suavely, "to be looking for a knife which was not yours on a lonely road. The natural inference is that you had some reason to lead you to think that there might be a knife there."

"Why, of course, Monsieur," said René impulsively. "I knew it was there and wanted to find it."

"How did you know it was there?" interposed the President a little impatiently, thinking of the good meal awaiting him.

"Because, Monsieur le Président," René

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began, then he stopped dead, realizing how he was about to give himself away.

M. Folgat half rose from his seat.

“Will Monsieur le Président allow me?”

The president bowed assent.

M. Folgat adjusted his glasses and addressed himself across the table to M. Pichon.

“Perhaps Kermarec had a friend who dropped——”

“Kindly address all your remarks to the prisoner,” interrupted the President.

M. Folgat murmured an apology and sat back in his chair.

If I may be allowed to continue,” said M. Pichon, bowing to the President with a deprecatory air, “I should like to ask Monsieur l’Accusé, why it was he was out at that hour. Was it a sick call?”

“No,” answered René, more sure of himself now, “I was trying to find this knife because it belonged to a friend.”

“As your Counsel kindly reminded you just now,” and a smile flitted across M. Pichon’s thin lips.

There was an audible laugh in the court.

The President turned severely to René.

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"I cannot understand your difficulty in explaining so simple a matter. You will kindly not waste the time of the court."

M. Pichon had taken the knife from René, and was pointing out a mark upon it to the Coroner. The Coroner nodded in assent.

"There happens to be some blood upon this knife," he said.

"Yes," said René, and his hands twitched nervously. M. Folgat caught his eye and frowned. René stopped abruptly.

"You were about to say?" and M. Pichon waited with a patient look of indifference upon his face; for the little byplay had not escaped his quick eyes.

"It is a fishermen's knife," said René lamely "Would there not be blood upon it. Monsieur le Procureur Général?"

"This blood has been analyzed. Monsieur l'Accusé forgets that we do not all possess the cold blood of a fish."

A little titter ran through the court at this sally. The President tapped impatiently. "Silence," he called; then he addressed M. Pichon.

"Allow me to continue."

M. Pichon bowed smilingly.

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René's head was in a whirl, and his mouth was parched so that his lips seemed to stick together when he tried to speak. He looked up over the President's desk, and then he straightened himself as if to prepare for a fresh ordeal, for he knew things were going badly. All eyes were upon him now. The interest was at its height, and the crowd were treading upon each other's heels in order to have a better view of the prisoner.

The President fixed his gray eyes sternly upon René.

"Did you know Sébastien le Moyne? "

"Yes, Monsieur le President."

"Was he an old friend of yours? "

"An old playmate, Monsieur le Président."

"I am told that he sailed that night in a boat for Iceland, shortly before they found the body of Monsieur le Capitaine, and that some men met you going down with him to the harbor. There is no use denying it," he added roughly, "for we have the men here as witnesses."

"I was not intending to deny it, Monsieur le Président," said René quietly.

"Why did you go down with le Moigne?"



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"To see him off, Monsieur le Président."

"What interest had you in seeing him off?"

René hesitated.

"I must ask you," continued the President impatiently, "to be so good as to tell the court as fully as you can all that passed that night between you, since le Moigne is not here to answer for himself."

René threw back his head. "I will tell you all I can, Monsieur le Président. I met le Moigne in the church. He made his confession and then we walked down to the harbor."

"Did le Moigne seem in any way distressed?"

"Yes, Monsieur le Président—naturally."

"Why 'naturally,'" echoed the President.

"Because he was—starving," said René, feeling for a word.

"Why was he starving?"

René checked a gesture of impatience.

"One starves, Monsieur le Président, when one has nothing to eat," he answered gravely.

"True," answered the President drily, "but I referred to the cause of his having nothing to eat. Had he no money?"



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“None, Monsieur le Président.”

“Being an old playmate, perhaps you offered him some?”

“Yes, but he refused it, Monsieur le Président.”

The President turned over some papers lying before him.

“Some money was found on the road beside the body of the Englishman.”

“And on the body too, Monsieur le Président,” interposed M. Folgat, half rising from his chair.

“True.” Then turning again to René he said, “Le Moigne had just made his confession to you. As a priest you may be under some pledge to secrecy, but as a citizen and man you are bound to reveal anything that may throw light upon the crime. I ask you if le Moigne told you anything in the confessional that bears upon this murder?”

René’s lips tightened. He drew himself up.

“Did he?” and the President tapped his desk impatiently.

Still René did not speak, but his eyes flashed angrily. A dead silence reigned in the court. The clerks ceased rustling their papers and

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looked up. Even M. Pinchon's mask of impassivity dropped for a moment.

Again in a cold voice, which expressed contempt blended with sarcasm, the President repeated his question.

"I ask you, did le Moigne's confession bear on the crime of the murder being tried here this morning?"

"Monsieur le Président," said René in a grave clear voice, "I am a priest first, a citizen after."

A hum of applause rang through the court, followed by a suppressed hiss.

"Silence," called the President angrily, then he turned again to René.

"You understand, Monsieur l'Accusé, that in refusing to answer my question you are abetting the murderer, and laying yourself open to the offense of contempt of court."

"I understand, Monsieur le Président," said René quietly, and his eyes rested above the President's head, on the image of One whose hands and feet were pierced for contempt of court.

"And you also understand that so far the evidence is against you; unless you can bring

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forward further evidence you have indeed no case."

"I understand, Monsieur le Président."

"And further," continued the President coldly, "the man you are so foolishly endeavoring to shield is dead."

"That makes no difference, Monsieur le Président, to my honor as a priest."

"Call the witnesses," ordered the President, suppressing a yawn as he motioned to René to sit.

The curé sprang to his feet, and began to push his way through the crowd.

"Monsieur le Président, I must speak, I——"

"Order, order," called the clerk.

But the curé was not to be silenced.

"Monsieur," he called again, "Monsieur le Président, I demand——"

"Kindly tell the gentleman who is making that disturbance that he will have a chance of speaking later," said the President with cold politeness, as he again motioned to the usher, who had hesitated for a moment at the interruption.

"I told you to call the witnesses."

## CHAPTER XIII

**J**EANNETTE was the first witness to be called. The curé, watching her from his corner, was delighted to see how self-possessed and unabashed she looked. "She's ready for a fray," he thought.

She looked round the court, and caught the curé's eye. Something like a wink passed between them. Then she took the place in the witness box pointed out to her, and her keen old eyes scanned the President with a comprehensive look. Much as she may have complained of M. René in the presbytère, she wasn't going to let any one else say anything against him.

She was sworn in, and the President put the usual questions to her.

"Know the *prisoner*, as you call him, why I should think I might be said to know him! I have known him since he was a little boy in a blouse, and the work I have had with him—why, many a time I've had——"

"Thank you," said the President dryly,

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“I wish for a simple answer to any question I put.”

“And how is one to know what you mean by a simple answer, Monsieur, in a place like this, in which every one is after finding something wrong in every other body?”

There was an audible smile in the court as the President raised his hand in protest.

“You must address the Judge as ‘Monsieur le Président,’ ” interposed a clerk in an agitated whisper, seizing his opportunity.

Jeannette made a noise that sounded like a snort, but had no time to pay him more attention, for the President was speaking.

“My good woman, we only want your witness, not your opinions. I ask you now,” he added as he saw her about to interrupt again, “whether you saw the prisoner on the evening of the day that the murder took place?”

“Saw him,” echoed Jeannette. “But what does Monsieur le Président take me for? Do you think I go about my work with my eyes shut?”

Another suppressed laugh rose in the court.

The President looked at Jeannette with an

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air of resigned patience, as a schoolmaster looks at a troublesome boy. He saw it was no use trying to stop her tongue, so he slightly changed his tactics.

"So you saw the prisoner that evening?"

"That evening! Don't I serve M. le Curé and M. René every evening with their supper? And isn't M. René for ever in and out of my kitchen, wanting first one thing and then another? Surely I would have seen him—Monseieur le Président," she added as an afterthought in answer to a furtive glance from the clerk.

"Did the prisoner want anything in especial that evening?"

"Well," said Jeannette, pausing for a moment lest her scorn at this learned man's ignorance should drive her to say more than was wise, "I couldn't be sure. He's always asking for something. 'Jeannette,' says he, 'give me a piece of bread and jam for little Pierre. His mother is out and he's had no supper.'"

"But what did he want that evening?" interrupted the President, almost at the end of his patience.

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“Well, Monsieur—Monseieur le Président—I’m just trying to think. There was a trowel for planting some roots he had found,” she said, puckering her brows, “and some nails for——”

“Might I be allowed, Monsieur le Président, to cross-examine this witness?” said M. Pichon, coming to the rescue.

The Judge nodded.

“Did the prisoner ask for anything to drink?”

“Drink? Well, yes, to be sure, Monsieur, that was just what I was coming to, but I do like to take my own time.”

“Of course, of course,” said M. Pichon, soothingly, with his most placid air. His unruffled suavity of manner had been of immense service to him in entrapping his victims.

“And was M. René, as you like to call him, thirsty?”

“No, Monseieur, I don’t think so, for brandy isn’t much good for satisfying thirst, Monsieur, is it?”

M. Pichon gravely shook his head as if considering the matter.

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“No, my good woman, perhaps not. It was brandy then that M. René was in quest of?”

“Yes, Monsieur. He comes rushing into my kitchen calling out, ‘Brandy, Jeannette, for the love of God, give me some brandy.’ He quite flustered me, Monsieur, and I was just reaching down a glass to pour some in, thinking perhaps that he was faint——”

“Does he faint often?” interrupted M. Folgat.

“Well, I have known him to go off sudden-like, but this time he seemed all excitement like, and he called for a flask. But there wasn’t any in the flask you see, Monseieur, so I got the big bottle we keep ready always for the sick——”

“Only for the sick?” asked M. Folgat, with a knowing look.

There was a titter in the court. Jeannette looked round in apparent indignation.

“Only for the sick, Monsieur,” she said with a sudden assumption of dignity.

“And then?” asked M. Pichon.

“As I was telling, Monsieur, when I was interrupted,” she continued severely, “I got



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down the big bottle from the top shelf of the cupboard, and was looking for a small one to pour some into, when M. René seized the bottle out of my hands and went off with it."

A burst of laughter greeted this information, which the President left unreprieved, for he was enjoying this little interlude in a rather heavy morning's work.

"And when did you see M. René next?"

"At supper, Monsieur," responded Jeanette shortly, for the laughter had offended her.

"Had the brandy had any effect?"

"What does Monsieur mean?"

"Well, was the prisoner, I mean M. René, at all excited or upset in any way?"

Monsieur is making a mistake," said Jeanette, with her most dignified air, "I tried to explain to Monsieur that the brandy was for the use of the sick."

M. Pichon coughed dubiously, and changed his manner.

"It was a large bottle, I understand. Was there much in it when the prisoner carried it off?"

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“It was nearly full.”

“And you think it necessary to keep so large a bottle—for—the sick?” he asked with a meaning look.

“It will be used in time, Monsieur.”

“Did M. René return it?”

Jeannette paused and shot up a hasty prayer to S. Ives to help her. It might look bad to say that M. le Curé had brought it back to her half empty.

“I don’t know who returned it, Monsieur, I found it back in the cupboard.”

“Did you notice anything unusual in M. René’s manner that night?” asked the President. M. Pichon didn’t seem to be making much way, he thought, and he was anxious to finish the trial and meet his friends at his favorite restaurant.

“Well, Monsieur le Président, I wasn’t about much that evening, I was tired-like. I don’t remember very much about that evening.”

“Perhaps,” interrupted the counsel for the defence, “the brandy was accountable for your forgetfulness?”

Jeannette whispered a word of thanks to S. Ives.

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“Why, yes, Monsieur, I don’t deny but what I sometimes cheer myself up a bit,” and she looked across the court to where she knew the curé was sitting.

M. le Curé, leaning back in his corner, was chuckling to himself. “I always knew that Jeannette was a good soul at bottom,” he said to himself.

After a few more questions Jeannette was allowed to depart. Other witnesses were called. Two fishermen who had met René and Sébastien on their way down to the boats, a peasant-woman who had been the first to pass the spot where the body of Captain Gaunt lay, and an old man who had watched *La Belle Bretonne* set sail. But their witness was taken very rapidly and in a perfunctory manner, for they had nothing to tell which brought any fresh light to bear upon the case, and the hour was getting late.

In the pause which followed their dismissal the curé again got up to speak.

“Afterwards, Monsieur,” cried the President, seeing him rise, “there is one more witness to be called.”

The curé sank back again into his corner.

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He strained forward with a frown upon his face, when he saw the Veuve Loubert being ushered into the witness box. For the last half-hour he had been breathing more freely. Fortunately there seemed to have been very few about that evening who had noticed René or Sébastien; but this woman—and the old man swore inwardly—she is sure to make mischief whenever she gets the chance.

La Veuve Loubert took her place with a sublime air of resignation, as much as to say, "It is entirely against my will that I am here, but it is my duty."

The usual preliminary questions were soon over.

"Let's get through quickly," whispered the President to the Procureur General.

"I understand," said M. Pichon, "that you are caretaker of the Parish Church of Pont-Croix? Were you there on the evening that this murder took place?"

"No, Monsieur, I had finished my work by midday; but I was walking on the road to Audierne that evening?"

"Indeed," said M. Pichon, with interest, "and whom did you see?"

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"There was no one exactly on the road, Monsieur, but I noticed M. le Vicaire by the hedge."

"You must address Monsieur as 'Monsieur le Procureur Général,'" whispered the clerk.

M. Pichon smiled benignly. "Let us waive our title," he said blandly.

La Veuve dropped a curtsy in confusion.

"Now, my good woman," continued M. Pichon, "tell me what M. le Vicaire appeared to be doing."

"He was down on his knees looking for something, and was peering about in the ditch—Monsieur."

"At what point of the road was this?"

"Just on the crest of the hill, Monsieur."

A look passed between M. Folgat and the Coroner.

"Was not that where the body was found?" he asked in a low voice.

The Coroner nodded assent.

"Did the prisoner see you?" M. Folgat asked the witness.

"No, Monsieur, I think not. He kept looking round in a frightened way as if he thought someone might be watching him, so

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I, not liking to put him out, kept well into the shadow of the hedge.”

“Did you follow him far?” asked M. Folgat dryly.

“Follow him, Monsieur?” answered la Veuve indignantly. “I wasn’t following. I was just going home to—at least,” she said correcting herself, “I was going to see a neighbor.”

“Exactly,” said M. Folgat still more drily.

La Veuve Loubert turned to M. Pichon.

“I thought, Monsieur, that it was you as was questioning me? And I was anxious—”

“Yes, yes,” said M. Pinchon soothingly. “Tell us all you can. Did you notice anything else that seemed—well, unusual?”

“Yes, Monsieur,” continued the Veuve appeased, “I saw M. le Vicaire jump the fence into the field, and he seemed to be running.”

“Yes? and is there anything else you can tell us? Even the smallest things help in a case of this sort,” he added encouragingly.

“Well, Monsieur, I am not one to be saying anything to get another into trouble, but there was something very queer, as I thought, which I found in the church when I went back to see all was straight for the morning.”

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“Oh, I understood that you had already finished your work in the church?” interrupted M. Folgat, adjusting his eyeglasses more firmly on his nose, a trick he had when his interest was more than usually aroused.

The Veuve was a little confused for a moment.

“Well, Monsieur, you see I felt a little uneasy-like, so I went back to the church to see if all was right.”

“You went back,” interposed M. Folgat, “to find out the cause of M. le Vicaire’s strange conduct.”

The President interposed.

“Kindly let Monsieur le Procureur Général continue,” he said stiffly.

“Pardon!” and M. Folgat turned his attention to some papers before him in which he seemed absorbed for the rest of the time.

“You found something ‘queer’ you say, in the church on your return?” went on M. Pichon, hardly noticing the interruption. “What may I ask was this ‘queer’ thing?”

“Well, Monsieur, in all the years I have been in charge of the church, I never saw such a thing in it before——”



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"And it was——?" said M. Pichon expectantly.

"I am ashamed to tell you, Monsieur, and it was in M. le Vicaire's confessional too."

"Exposed to view?"

"No, Monsieur, hidden away in a corner behind a hassock."

"Suppose we call this 'queer' thing a bottle," said M. Pichon sauvely. "Was it full?"

"No, Monsieur, it was half empty."

"And what, may I ask, did you do with it?"

"I took it straight to the presbytère, Monsieur——"

"And then?"

"I gave it to M. le Curé, of course, Monsieur."

"How did M. le Curé receive it? Did he seem surprised?"

"M. le Curé didn't seem quite his usual. He was much upset and told me not to mention it to any one."

"Indeed! But you said it was in M. le Vicaire's confessional you found it."

"Yes, Monsieur?" said the Veuve, in a questioning tone.

"Nothing, nothing," said M. Pichon, look-



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ing in the direction of the curé, whose flushed angry face had attracted the attention of more than one in the court.

“You are to be congratulated on the assiduity with which you fulfill your office, my good woman,” said the President, with a keen glance at the Veuve, as he gave the sign for her dismissal. “Your curé has indeed a treasure in you.”

The Veuve, who was quite impervious to irony, gave a curtsy, as she replied with an air of meek resignation—

“I just try to do my duty, Monsieur, as I am sure you do too,” and with another deferential curtsy, she swept out of the court, as if she had been a duchess.

M. Pichon blew his nose suspiciously, and the broad shoulders of M. Folgat were shaking. The President made an effort to regain his dignity.

“I now call upon the Curé Doyen of Pont-Croix to give evidence.”

The curé felt that all the spirit had been taken out of him by that odious woman, as he was inclined to call her. On one thing at least he was resolved, that she should no

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longer exercise the office on which she had been so warmly congratulated. He rose from his seat and made his way through the crowd.

"Will you state what you have to say, Monsieur le Curé, or shall we question you in the formal way?" asked Monsieur le President politely.

"I only wish to bear testimony to the unimpeachable character of my friend and colleague," began the curé.

"Perhaps, Monsieur, you would be so kind as to go into the witness box," M. Pichon interrupted.

An usher had been holding the door open for him, but the curé hadn't noticed. Already nervous, he felt all his courage ebb as he found himself exposed to every one's view in the witness box. But there was René to think of. He must forget himself.

René was sitting in the corner of the dock, his head between his hands. He hardly listened to all that was going on, but when he heard the curé's name called he looked up. "Dear old man," he thought, and a sudden tenderness seized him, how he must dislike

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being there. How splendid of him to try and shield him, but what was the good? He would be condemned, he was certain of it. It was the will of God, who had accepted this offering: now it had only to be carried out. He wished he could stop the curé speaking, and save him this unnecessary pain. Still René listened with interest, for M. Sévigny was speaking rapidly, and with a rough eloquence—testifying to the good character of his vicar. “How could he see all that in me?” thought René, overwhelmed and humiliated by the old man’s unstinted praise.

The curé was speaking now of his unremitting care of the sick and all in need, of the love the children had for him, and how such a crime was utterly impossible to a man of his nature. But he was not allowed to continue.

“Monsieur Sévigny,” interrupted the President, “it seems to me you are encroaching on the duties of the *Conseil de l’Accusé*. What we want is any direct evidence. You have none? Very well, then, Monsieur, that was what I understood: that you were not willing to give evidence in this trial. But perhaps you

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will use your influence on the prisoner, to persuade him to give the information to the court which he alone can give. We have no desire to punish an innocent man. Our one object is to trace the murderer. If your young friend is all that you think him to be, he will at once see how unjustifiable and wrong is his course. It is an injustice to himself, to the friends and relations of the murdered man, and gross ingratitude to you."

The curé flushed angrily.

"You wish me to persuade my friend to violate the most solemn oaths which any man can take? "

"We wish him to fulfill the most binding oaths than any man or citizen can undertake, those to his country and the state," interposed the President angrily.

"I cannot accept your view, Monsieur le Président. God must come first."

The President shrugged his shoulders. He turned to the clerk.

"Are there any more witnesses to be called?"

"No, Monsieur le Président."

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“Then,” said he, looking towards René, “I will ask the prisoner if he has any defense to make. You, Monsieur, can go.”

The curé meekly got down from the witness box. He had failed as usual, but he gave René a reassuring smile as he wearily went back to his seat.

René stood up.

“No, Monsieur le Président, I have nothing more to say.”

“You still persist in silence?”

René bowed.

“Then, gentlemen, I call upon you to sum up.”

M. Folgat, the *Conseil de l'Accusé*, got up from his seat. He was conscious that he had managed the case badly, still it was a foregone conclusion. There was little chance for anyone pitted against M. Pichon, who had the reputation of proving every man guilty upon whose case he sat. Besides, it was known that he and the President worked hand in glove, and the President had never proved lenient where the Church was concerned. His anti-clerical bias was a matter of repute throughout Brittany. Moreover he had had

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no definite evidence to go upon, and was forced to fall back on the old methods.

In his speech he laid all the stress he could upon the unimpeachable character of the prisoner, and the needlessness of attempting to defend such an one from so serious an accusation. He emphasized all the curé had said concerning him, and if any one could know M. Kermarec, surely it was M. Sévigny, who had lived under the same roof with him for so many years.

"Only one," interrupted a voice.

"Well, was not one year sufficient to gauge the character of a man with whom one sat down daily to eat? Besides, what man of sane mind would murderously set upon another, unknown to him, in broad daylight, and with no provocation? Was M. Kermarec in need of money?" he asked ironically. "Was a man of such a kindly temperament, to whom the children came in their little difficulties and sorrows, was such an one likely to try to take another's life! Indeed, the possibility of M. le Vicaire being the criminal was so absurd as to be hardly worth the serious attention of a jury so learned as this. It was,

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in fact, a preposterous charge. And so, gentlemen," he ended, turning to the benches on which the jury sat, "I know I may leave this matter safely in your hands, being assured that a body of men so clear-sighted as you are, and with a reputation for justice as renowned as yours, will not be led astray by any minor issues; but that you will be able to decide without a moment's hesitation upon a case as blatant as it is simple, so that there exists no child even but would find it easy of solution."

M. Folgat wiped his red face with a large purple silk handkerchief, and subsided into his seat uneasily. He knew he had made but a poor defense, but how could a man keep his head clear in such heat? The court was suffocating.

The faces of the jury expressed annoyance. They were *not* children and they resented M. Folgat's off-hand manner. The crowd applauded, allowed at last to give vent to their pent-up emotions.

Then Monsieur le Procureur Général rose, and immediately silence reigned again, as the people pressed forward, wherever they could find room, to hear the better. His smooth,



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calm utterance was very different from the rather stammering and excited outburst of M. Folgat.

“It is hardly needful to state that I entirely agree with the learned *Conseil de la partie civile*. He has made it very clear that it would seem improbable, nay impossible, for a man with the reputation of the accused to be guilty of so base and uncalled for crime. But the question is not quite as simple as my learned colleague has endeavored to make it appear. It is unfortunately quite possible, and alas, not rare, that a man entirely incapable of committing a crime himself, has yet been known to aid and abet another in the commission of what he scruples—not to use a harsher word—to undertake himself. No one who has listened to the evidence given here in this court this morning, can hesitate for a moment to acknowledge that the accused had full cognizance of the facts of the murder, and that he is shielding the criminal. Why, I ask you, is he shielding the criminal? It is a crime against all the laws of the religion which he professes as a priest. We do not know—no evidence has come to light to show us—the



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reasons for which the crime was committed. But he (and M. Pichon pointed dramatically to René who sat with bowed head in the dock) the prisoner knows; and his duty as a citizen, and as a member of that religion of which he claims to be a minister, demands that he should aid us poor servants of the State in this unpleasant, but binding duty, of bringing the crime home to the criminal.

“But, as you have heard, gentlemen, he has refused to do so, refused to fulfill the most elementary duties of justice and religion. Gentlemen, I take it, that that in itself is a very serious offense, and in itself calls for a severe penalty. And not only is it a moral offense against the State, but by shielding the murderer he incurs also the punishment due to the murderer, for he has taken upon himself the responsibility of the crime, and in the eyes of the law he is guilty of concealing the felony.

“Gentlemen, we have heard of the unimpeachable character the accused bears. It has been held up as an extenuation of his offense. An extenuation! Is it not rather a greater cause for his condemnation? Surely one brought up from childhood in the atmos-

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phere of religion, educated in a seminary, and, alas that it should be so, the leader and guide of others in that religion of which he is so poor an exponent—such a one has the less excuse, and must therefore be judged with the greater rigor. This, gentlemen of the jury, must be borne in mind when you come to make your decision. His plea of the secrecy of the confessional is an old and greatly mis-used weapon, and one which we in these enlightened days have done well to rule out. This excuse cannot serve a man in trying to evade the law, and you, gentlemen, I take it, are men of education and intelligence. You are not slaves to effete and childish superstitions.

There was a movement in the jury's tightly packed bench. This little sop to their vanity stirred them, for all, save M. Ribot, an atheist and architect, were petty tradesmen and shopkeepers. M. Pichon knew the type well and how to flatter them into deciding as he wished.

"I ask you, therefore," he continued, "to make your decision carefully, as just and law-abiding citizens, and to let no sentiments of mere affection, or any scruples of your indi-

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vidual consciences, sway you in so serious a matter, or divert your mind for one instant from what must seem to you the only right and equitable judgment.”

There was a hum of approbation as he sat down, and an excited whispering as the jury left the court room, which suddenly ceased as they returned. They were only absent for a few minutes, but to René the minutes were like hours. He had listened carefully to all M. Pichon's speech, and felt there could be little doubt as to what their decision would be. Monsieur le Procureur Général knew but too well how to influence men's opinions; the law in his hands was like some finely tempered instrument in the hands of a skilled mechanic. He knew every pivot and hinge of it.

But there was another law of which M. Pichon was curiously ignorant, and over which he had no control. The crucifix was bathed in light when René fixed his eyes upon it while he listened to the verdict of the jury.

“We find the prisoner guilty of concealing the felony.”

“That,” said the President rising, “is a very grave charge, and all the more serious in

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the case of one whose profession it is to teach and guide others. I find it, therefore, my painful duty to condemn the accused to ten years of *travaux forcés*."

"*Travaux forcés*," repeated René to himself, and he clenched his hands over the cross he wore concealed under his cassock.

"Bravo, Pichon," said the President, hastily gathering up the papers strewn on his desk, "we are only ten minutes late for lunch after all."

## CHAPTER XIV

**R**ENÉ had been in prison some weeks. At first he had been too much stunned to think. The frightful strain of the trial; the fatigue of the long protracted journey, and agony of being herded together with criminals of all ranks and classes; the shame he had felt, in spite of his innocence, at the looks cast upon him by the crowd, as he had to walk through the streets with manacled wrists; the coarse food which at first he had refused in disgust, but which sheer hunger in the end forced him to accept; all these had combined together to numb and deaden his feelings, so that he had moved as if in a dream. But now his thoughts were beginning to arrange themselves again, and his head felt clearer.

Often in the seminary, when reading the lives of the mystics and saints, he had thought to himself that after all a prison cell was not so very far removed from a monk's or a hermit's. Now he could put his theories into practice.

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Cut off from all companionship, save for the daily trudge round the prison court for exercise, he might be as truly a solitary here as in the desert. His meals were thrust in through a hatch in the wall, he hardly ever saw a warder or jailer; yet he could never get away from the consciousness of a peep-hole in the door, just above the hatch, where he sometimes caught a glimpse of eyes upon him. Day and night that hated sense of being spied upon obsessed him. That, he realized, was the hardest thing of all which he would have to overcome, and he set his will to do it with all his might.

There was one great contrast, however, between a monk's cell and his own, and René saw no way of remedying it at first. The place was dirty; to René's fastidious eyes horribly so. The walls were grimy, the floor looked as if no amount of scrubbing would ever make it clean, the window high up in the wall and quite out of reach, was coated with dirt. René had dreams of asking if he might have his paints, and of redecorating the walls with the life of some saint, but at present all had to be left to the imagination. Only his

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straw pallet looked new, and his blankets were, he thanked God, clean.

His concern was to map out the day, and as far as possible, bring it under rule. He had to rise, and eat, and take exercise at the regulation hours, but for the rest he was free to arrange the work given him at what time he chose. His cell had to be swept out, his mattress rolled up and stowed away, his plate and mug washed; under the warder's surveillance at first, but the warder soon discovered the sort of man he had to deal with and left him wonderfully free. So René managed by a little ingenuity to find set times for his daily offices, the repetition of which was a constant solace to him. They seemed to link him up with all his friends, who were using the same prayers and repeating the same psalms at very much the same hour. By dint of custom his work, which at first he found very irksome and over which he felt very slow and clumsy, became almost mechanical to him. He found he could manage it with scarcely any interruption to his meditation; and then, when his daily task was over, he was free to spend



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the time as he would,—in writing, or reading, or, most often, in prayer.

In the midst of spiritual privileges René had often sought God and found Him not. In his yearly retreat he had sometimes called upon Him with strong crying and tears, and yet God had seemed to hide His face; but here in this prison cell, with no exterior aids, it seemed sometimes to René as if he truly were already at the gate of Heaven; as if already he could hear the distant echo of that music beside which all earthly music is but as the sound of tinkling cymbals; as if he caught a flash of the Vision of God, which seemed actually at times to flood his poor cell with light. Then René would hide his head in his hands, and kneeling in the midst of his cell, would let himself be floated off into this inexpressible and invisible light. Sometimes he seemed to be swept up as if by a wheel of fire which appeared to be endlessly circling round the throne of God. A fire, it seemed to René, made up of the souls of those whose will was ever intent on God; the fiery wheel of the Will of God, the working of which set the whole vast world throbbing with motion.



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How long such glimpses of the world of Light lasted René never knew. Sometimes they left an unspeakable peace and quiet in his heart, the unshakable quiet which lies at the bottom of the ocean. At other times they filled him with a joy that must needs find expression, and he would sing aloud for sheer delight and gaiety of heart the *Te Deum*, or some other hymn; but perhaps more often they left him with a sense of emptiness and flatness. The walls of his cell seemed dirtier, the pallet bed harder than before; and very human tears would well into his eyes. It was as if the light had been extinguished behind some stage transparency; and the sunset glow, and leafy trees were seen to be merely dull paint upon a coarse canvas.

But René with his seminary training would not let himself rest there. He had learned discipline at a great cost; and it stood him now in good stead. At such times he would turn resolutely to his laborious work, or recite his breviary, and a sense of strength would steal into his spirit, such as an athlete feels takes possession of his body after strong exercise.

Yet there were terrible hours of reaction

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in which René was thrown back upon himself, and on the sense of his own nothingness. Why, he would ask in misery, had God made him, was it only to mock him? God didn't want him, for had he not sought Him in agony, wrestling it seemed in vain. The bare walls of his cell mocked him in their emptiness. Where is your God? they seemed to ask. If God is Love, would He not respond to the cry of one who loved Him? The world he knew was full of God. Was he alone forsaken of Him?

At these times of agony René used to feel if he could only get away, out into the country, then he would find God. Visions of its beauty rose before him. Of the long low line of the horizon and the sea glistening under the sunshine; of the trees all bursting into life in their glorious robes of green and red and gray; and he seemed to hear the caroling of the birds. All these sights and sounds of the country René could call up at will. God was in them, and rejoiced in them. He saw it was very good, but why had He left him, René, out of this wonderful scheme?

At other times he could feel the flash of His presence as He passed, and the heat

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scorched him, blasting him with the breath of His displeasure. That was what tortured René—God's displeasure and anger. How could he find relief?

He repeated the prayers he had learned as a boy at the seminary, or the great prayer of Saint Ignatius, *Suscipe Domine*. Yes, God *had* taken all: his liberty, his memory, even his understanding. But his will? Was that God's? He couldn't take that without his own consent. God's will had to replace his will.

Then a light came to René as he prayed. This darkness *was* God's will for him. He must accept it, find God in it. If the light was not so intense there would be no darkness at all. It is the light that makes the darkness, and the greater the light, then of necessity the greater the darkness.

With a supreme effort of will René bowed himself to the darkness. He let himself sink into it and be borne along in it. The blackness of the waters seemed to engulf him. He felt himself as a tiny speck floating on a great sea, absolutely alone, with no hand to help or hold him, but tossed about at the mercy of the waves. But gradually he knew more

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clearly and more intimately than he had ever known before, that it was the sea of the Love of God, on which and by which he was being buffeted. Far below in the unfathomable depths there was peace and rest in the Everlasting arms.

Then René would try to express what he thought and experienced in his diary.

“For most of us,” he wrote. “it is only when we grow older that we begin to understand the manifoldness of God’s dealings with each individual soul. As I look back upon my life I cannot in sincerity accuse myself of any very great sin, nothing which seems to justify so severe a punishment; and yet at the seminary Père Perron taught us to consider all that came to us of sorrow or pain as a just reward of our sins. But now another explanation is dawning upon me. Perhaps it is not so much in punishment, but as a great reward, that God has taken me into a veritable wilderness. Is it that He is going to make known to me things that are too wonderful to utter? In all ages God has made Himself known to man in the loneliness of nature; and I am worse than alone, shut off from all human intercourse, like some dangerous dog imprisoned in a kennel.”

So he wrote, and he would comfort himself with the memory of Saint John of the

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Cross imprisoned in his monastery, and subjected to the cruelty and barbarity of his haters; and yet amid it all inspired to write books which had solaced and consoled many a soul in their worst hours of aridity and suffering; and incited many a one to aim at perfection of which he would never else have dreamed.

## CHAPTER XV

MADAME LE MOIGNE lay huddled up in her great bed. The close-fitting black skull cap that the Breton peasant wears under her coif, and rarely removes, served to emphasize the yellowness of her dried-up face, full of wrinkles in which lay the streaks of deeply embedded grime. Nature is a harsh mother to those who treat her with too great familiarity; she traces deep furrows and lines, even when still young, upon those who work all day and in all weathers in the open air, and Madame le Moigne had worked in the fields since childhood. Her thin brown hand clutched the check sheet. Where had Yvonne left her *tisane*? she wondered wearily. She said she was going down to the cemetery at Pont-Croix. It would take her more than an hour.

What's the good of going there? thought Madame le Moigne fretfully. Nothing would bring Sébastien back to life again. Ah, but God was hard to have taken her only son.

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And the curé of Pont-Croix—he hardly ever came to see her now. He was getting old too. And the new vicaire—he didn't seem to understand like M. René, who had been brought up among them. He came from the north and didn't speak their dialect. Ah, well, *le bon Dieu* surely wouldn't keep her waiting much longer, lying there a burden to every one; a long fit of coughing seized her, and she stretched out her hand to feel for the cup Yvonne had left ready.

As she did so she heard a noise of footsteps crunching the gravel on the path outside; than a knock which seemed curiously familiar to her. Who was it used to knock like that? . . . two sharp knocks and then a long one. He always did even as a little lad. But her wits were surely wandering. He was lying somewhere under that pitiless sea, the graveyard of many a Breton sailor.

Again that knock, repeated timidly, and then the door was pushed open uncertainly. "Whoever it is seems afraid," she thought; so she raised herself as well as she could in her bed and called out in a shrill cracked voice, "Come in."



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Sébastien looked round the cottage with fear in his eyes. He hardly dared to think he would find all as it used to be. He stood hesitating in the doorway with his cap in his hand. Then he removed his sabots, and crept up softly to the bed, and knelt down beside it.

“Mother,” he cried, and great tears welled up in his eyes. He never thought he would have felt like this. “Oh, mother, and you are still here.”

Madame le Moigne shrank back and crossed herself with trembling hands. “Who are you?” she asked, her voice hoarse with fear.

“Mother, mother, don’t you know me?” and Sébastien took the old hard hand in his and stroked it. “I am Sébastien. Didn’t you get my letter? I wrote to tell you we were coming back. ”

But the old woman seemed still too frightened to speak.

“Look at me, mother, see it’s me, look into my eyes,” and he put his arm round her to raise her up.

“Ah, but God is good, God is good,” she ejaculated feebly, as she stroked his rough



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jersey. "We thought you were drowned. They said they had found your body; I don't understand, I don't understand," and a look of great perplexity and weariness stole across her face.

Sébastien saw the cup beside her and made her drink.

"Now, you will feel better," and he laid her back gently on to the pillow. "The shock will be too much for her," he thought. "I must find Yvonne"; and he tried to make his mother understand that he was asking where Yvonne was.

But the old woman broke out into a fit of hysterical laughter at the question.

"Yvonne; he asks for Yvonne!"

A great fear clutched at Sébastien's heart.

"Dead? Is she dead?" he asked.

"No, it's you that's dead," and the tears coursed down her cheeks. "Yvonne has gone down to the cemetery," and again that helpless nervous laughter seized upon her.

Sébastien looked round in despair, and his eyes chanced on something which seemed to him unusual, beside the open hearth. It looked like a cradle. But how could it be?

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It must be empty; and he stepped across the uneven floor of caked mud to look more closely. Stooping down he lifted a dark piece of cloth which served as a coverlet. A tender smile hovered for a second round his lips, for there, in its little white cap, sleeping peacefully, was a baby of a few months old. Its tiny dimpled thumb was thrust into its mouth. He gazed at it for a moment, a feeling of awe taking possession of him. The baby stirred, as if conscious that its privacy was being invaded. It removed its thumb from its mouth, and rolled round, thrusting its nose deep into the pillow.

Sébastien gently let the coverlet drop and stepped back to his mother's bed. She seemed to have fallen asleep. He could hear no sound. He listened to her breathing for a few moments then creeping up to the door and slipping his feet into his sabots again, he very quietly let himself out, closing the door gently behind him. Should he call a neighbor, and ask her to watch by his mother? "No," he thought, "I had better see Yvonne first before any one else knows I'm back."

Once out on the high road he could breathe

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more freely. He stretched his arms wide with a familiar gesture, and began to stride down the hill towards Pont-Croix.

What did it all mean? *His* child? Could it be his child? Was he really a father? He took deep breaths of the soft summer air. He felt fit and strong in every limb. How good life was, and Yvonne, how did she feel? He must find her quickly, and he hastened his steps.

Yvonne had made a little posy of flowers from the hedgerows as she went along; yellow veitch and the deep red clover, and Our Lady's bed-straw, and all the little flowers that grow so shyly under the hedges in the early summer. She had paused to kneel at the crucifix over the tomb of a former curé. It was a spot she loved, for under the great granite crucifix the sculptor had placed the figure of the old priest in cassock and surplice, kneeling in prayer, a stole round his neck and biretta on his head. This tomb was the great glory of the cemetery at Pont-Croix, and many a visitor turned off from his course to see it, for the cemetery stood a little way back up a lane. In itself the cemetery was not beautiful, for it was

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strewn with little black or gray metal crosses, with inscriptions painted in glaring white. Some were rusty, others falling down, but on almost every grave was placed a waxen wreath covered by a glass bowl.

Yvonne made her way to a cross still glistening with fresh paint, but otherwise not distinguishable from all the rest. On it was written:

SÉBASTIEN LE MOIGNE

Aged 32

Drowned at sea.

Yvonne had never yet bought a waxen wreath or glass globe. An innate sense of beauty, which she could not have analyzed, told her they were ugly; besides, the cross alone had taken all the savings Madame le Moigne had laid aside, and poor Yvonne had no money to call her own. She took a little pot which held some faded flowers, which she threw away, replacing them by those she had gathered, and then she knelt in prayer. She had buried her face in her hands, and was so deeply absorbed in her prayer, that she did not hear the sound of steps approaching.

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When Sébastien caught sight of her he stood still, for he feared to frighten her. With all the Breton's reverence for the dead, out of habit, and without thinking of what he was doing, he took off his cap and crossed himself as he began to say a prayer for the soul of the man for whom Yvonne was praying. It was an ugly little mound beside which she was kneeling. The grass had not yet grown over the unsightly clods of clayey earth in which Yvonne's little pot of flowers was forlornly embedded.

His lips were mechanically muttering the *De profundis*, which he had learned long years ago when he used to serve as a boy. He had got to the third verse, "Si iniquitates observaveris, Domine; Domine, quis sustinebit?" when his eyes traveled up to the cross, and he read as in a dream, his own name painted there: "Sébastien le Moigne. Drowned at sea."

Would to God, he thought bitterly, he *were* lying there at peace under the quiet earth! And yet, no—for God would be there too. He couldn't escape Him, turn where he would, and he groaned aloud. Yvonne gave

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a low cry and looked up startled. Had someone followed her into the cemetery?

"Yvonne, Yvonne," cried Sébastien, holding out his arms. "Don't you know me?" and he threw himself down on the grass beside her. "It's me."

"Sébastien," and the name seemed merely to tremble on her lips. "But I thought!—you were—oh, Sébastien——" she broke off sobbing.

"No, Yvonne, it was a mistake. I am alive—here—feel me," and he put his arms closer round her.

But Yvonne pushed him from her that she might look into his face. Was it really Sébastien? Yes, it was the same black crisp hair and beard, and bronzed face—but the eyes? How they had altered! All the merriment seemed to have died out of them, and was replaced by a hunted, anxious look. Poor Sébastien, how he must have suffered! and she turned her own eyes away, for a sickening sense of fear was taking possession of her. Those eyes seemed to reveal secrets to her which she had tried to shut out and drive away. Horrible doubts and questionings, which haunted her

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as she lay awake at night, but which the news of Sébastien's death had banished, seemed again to be coming to life. But no, it couldn't be true. Sébastien, whom she had known all her life, her old friend and playmate, who had always protected her, and been her lover, and now in everything save name, her husband. And she put her arms round him in that old clinging way she had when she was a child.

Sébastien clasped her to him and tried to soothe her, for her tears were falling fast, tears half of sorrow and half of joy. Her pent-up feelings must at last have vent.

They hardly knew what they said to each other at first. It was a long time before either of them could find words in which to ask all the questions which seemed to be choking them, yet each concealed from the other what was uppermost in their thoughts. Sébastien told Yvonne about his voyage, and companions, and of the long silent nights off the coast of Iceland, how he thought of her and longed for her; then of the storm which had wrecked some of the boats, but which they had weathered; and Yvonne listened with only half her mind, for she was longing to ask why



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it was he had gone off so suddenly, and yet dare not for fear of the answer.

And then Sébastien remembered his mother. He told Yvonne how he had frightened her by his sudden appearance.

"You go back, and I will follow you; for I must go and see M. le Vicaire first," he said.

"M. le Vicaire," exclaimed Yvonne in surprise, "but do you know him?"

"Know him!" and Sébastien gave her a look of utter bewilderment.

Yvonne laughed at him.

"Well, how could I tell you knew M. Laurent? He hasn't been here many months."

Sébastien made an impatient movement, as he rose from the side of the curé's tomb on which they had been sitting.

"I don't know who you are talking about. I am going to see Monsieur René."

"Monsieur René! But, Sébastien——" began Yvonne in distress.

"It's not too late, is it?" asked Sabastien unconcernedly, wiping the dust from his trousers.

"Too late!" echoed Yvonne blankly. 'Why, don't you know? Haven't you heard——?'



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"I've heard nothing beyond the fact of my own death," said Sébastien smiling a funny little smile, as he bent down to take leave of Yvonne with another kiss.

But Yvonne recoiled from him.

"Oh, Sébastien," she said, vexed, "how can you joke about it. Surely you know. Didn't you meet any one when you arrived?" she asked.

"No, I spoke to no one. I went straight up to mother. And Yvonne," for suddenly he felt he *must* speak of it, "you never told me—I found something in the cottage I had never seen there before," and he smiled shyly, blushing a little beneath his tan.

Yvonne hid her face in his shoulder.

"I told you all about it in my letter, which you never got. But you guessed?" and Sébastien saw the tears glistening on her eye-lashes as she looked up at him half afraid.

"Don't cry, *petite*, I knew it might happen any time. Were you very ill, little one? Did you suffer much?" and he stroked her cheek as he used to do when she was small.

"Have you seen her?" she whispered.

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"Isn't she beautiful? She's just like you."  
Sébastien pressed her closer to him.

"Is it a girl?"

"Yes."

"You darling! How I love you!"

"And do you know her name?"

"What, you've had her christened, you little *dévôte*," said Sébastien teasingly. "Didn't the curé scold you?"

"Ah, Sébastien, you mustn't joke. He said we did very wrong, and he was as grieved as if he had been my own father. But Sébastien, dear, you will go to confession and make it all right, won't you? M. le Curé had promised to marry us quietly as soon as ever you got back, and then,"—and Yvonne again hid her face on his shoulder, half laughing and half crying, "you were drowned, and I offered, oh, so many masses for your soul! All the money I could earn I put aside for you, and M. le Curé, he was so good, he said oh, so many masses without my paying anything at all," and she threw her arms round his neck.

"*Tiens, petite*," said Sébastien after a few moments. "Now you must let me go," and

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he gently drew her hands down. "I must go and see Monsieur René."

"But I told you, Sébastien. It's too dreadful. They took Monsieur René and they put him in prison. Oh, I can't bear to think of it."

"In prison! Tell me quickly,—why?" and Sébastien's face looked drawn and anxious all in a moment.

"An Englishman was murdered. It must have been just after you had left, or you would have known, surely."

"Well?" said Sébastien, trying to keep back all emotion.

"And they couldn't find the murderer, and then—oh, Sébastien," she broke off, looking very earnestly into his eyes, "they said you had made—they thought perhaps—oh, I can't tell you what they said, but Monsieur René would say nothing, and they found a knife in his drawer, and they said that he must have known about it anyhow, and if he would persist in shielding the guilty man, he must be punished for him."

Sébastien sank onto the curé's tomb. He felt too giddy to stand. So Monsieur René

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had shielded him and was suffering for him. Oh, God, what a dilemma he was in! His first instinct was to hide, for if they really suspected him they would be on his track very quickly.

The old horrible sense of dread seized Yvonne again. Her worst fears, which she had tried so often to drive away, were confirmed when she looked at Sébastien, crouched down on the gravestone, the picture of despair and fright. She knelt down at his feet and put her arms around him. She had never loved him more than at this moment when he seemed most to need her pity and protection.

"Tell me the truth, Sébastien," she said earnestly taking his hand, which fell down limply, into both her own. "Trust me, tell me all."

His shoulders heaved with the sobs he tried in vain to suppress.

"Tell me," she urged. "Tell me everything."

Sébastien could keep back the truth no longer. For months he had been longing to unburden his mind to someone, and he found himself telling her all—his attempted

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confession, how Monsieur René had helped him to escape, and all the misery and torture he had gone through since.

“Monsieur René did all this for you,” she whispered, and something seemed to make her heart beat very rapidly. She felt torn to pieces between sorrow for Sébastien, mixed with a certain sense of shrinking from him, and admiration for René. She thought of them as boys together again. In those days Sébastien had always seemed to have the most courage and daring. She looked down now at his heaving shoulders, and contrasted them in her mind with Monsieur René’s calmness and self-control when she had seen him in the Governor’s house. As a boy nothing could move René when he had once made up his mind to a thing; but Sébastien was swayed by every current, like an eddying leaf. But it is the weakness of a man that appeals most to women of Yvonne’s type. She could not bear to see him cry like this. All the mother in her surged to the surface, as she knelt down beside him and took his head in her arms as if he were a child, while she wiped his tears away with her apron. They were so full of

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their own trouble that neither had heard the sound of footsteps.

“Come home,” cried Yvonne pleadingly. “Come home. Your mother will be wanting me, and poor little baby will be hungry, and you too, and after supper we will both go and see M. le Curé.”

“I am here, at your service, my child,” answered the curé as with thumb in his breviary he stopped in front of the tomb, looking down on them with wonder in his mild blue eyes, colored, as it seemed, by that Heaven which he daily sought.

## CHAPTER XVI

**T**HE curé was so changed that for a moment Sébastien hardly knew him. Poor M. Sévigny, how ill he looked! His cheeks were flabby and had lost their healthy color, his cassock hung loosely on him, and his shoulders were bent. He walked heavily, dragging his feet along the ground. Could this really be the hale, rosy-cheeked old man whom he used to go a long way round to avoid meeting, dreading the sharpness of his tongue?

Nothing ages a man more rapidly than anxiety and sorrow. A young man can rebound from grief, and resolutely put the thoughts that torture him far off, and bend all his will upon what lies before him; but the curé was no longer young. Try as he would to thrust it from him, the thought of René was always with him—on his visits to his flock, when he paced up and down the garden reciting his breviary, as he lay down to sleep at night, and most of all in church. It was not only that he missed him, but his heart was



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sensitively tender to all in sorrow, and he pictured René as he lay sleepless on his hard bed, or alone in his cell, or bullied by his warders. The old man tortured himself with imagining all the horrors and discomforts of prison life of which he had read in books. Occasionally René was allowed to write, but the letters told him nothing, for he knew they had to be submitted to the governor, and they were very short, and very infrequent. How was he to know that René had found peace, and even a certain joy, amid his bare and sordid surroundings; he had found the mystic's key to all the sorrows and crosses in life—the surrender of his will?

It is hard for a man not to measure another by himself. The curé was conscious that prison life would drive him almost to madness. His quick fiery temper would continuously land him in difficulties, and the strain of imprisonment would crush his spirit even to breaking-point. He had never quite gauged René's character. It had puzzled him so often—this curious mixture in René of courage and timidity; a quiet oblivion to others, combined with a heroic self-denial;



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immense sensitiveness, joined to an almost callous disregard of another's feelings.

If the curé was conscious himself of having changed, his flock were still more conscious of it. Jeannette hadn't the heart to scold him any longer, he looked so forlorn and sad in his shabby old cassock. She let him drop candle-grease on her freshly polished table, or scatter the ink from his pen on to the carpet without rebuke. He's just like a baby, she thought, it's no use saying anything to him. So she went back to her kitchen without a word, and bent her mind to concocting some savory dish by which she might tempt him to eat.

"Come, Monsieur," she would say, "you must eat, or Monsieur René won't know you when he comes back"; for she stuck to it that, sooner or later, the murderer would be found, and the vicaire would come walking into her kitchen again.

The curé smiled sadly.

"I shall be gone before that, Jeannette."

Before many weeks had passed the bishop sent a new vicaire, who, much to Jeannette's disgust, was to live at the presbytère. It

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distracted the curé's thoughts for a little while having to show the young priest the church, and the schools under the good sisters, and taking him round the parish and introducing him to his flock. M. Laurent came from a village a little distance off, where there was a newly built church, and all seemed to be in first-class order; but his heart was touched by the old curé, and he tried hard to keep back the criticisms that rose to his lips. Still the curé was conscious of an implied rebuke in his questions about the parish and the church; and the fine table manners of this young man at table, his carefully kept hands and his dislike of snuff—all these and a thousand other trifles aroused an unreasonable anger in him. There was no doubt he was getting unduly irritable, and yet Jeannette never seemed to notice it. She never scolded him now.

Jeannette, he knew, disliked the new vicaire far more than he did. She talked about him in a way he ought never to allow, but he felt too tired to intervene or rebuke her as he used to do when Monsieur René was in disgrace. If his house wasn't good enough for

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young Laurent, let him find a lodging elsewhere. He resented his taking René's place; sitting in his seat at table, sleeping in his room, reading his books. Ah, God forgive him, what a querulous old man he was growing!

Little did the curé guess that a growing respect and admiration for him was gathering strength in the hearts of his people. They had always loved him; now there was something more than love in their eyes as they looked at him from their doorsteps, when he passed up and down the village street. They would put down their work, and come out to gaze after him, or to give him a greeting. "*He's* a good man," they would say, shaking their heads, as their eyes followed him down the road.

"May *le bon Dieu* reward him," said another.

And the little children would leave their games and cluster round him, putting their hands into his. There was something very soothing to the old man in the touch of their soft little hands. He would stoop down and pat their heads, and then they would run

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back laughing to their mothers, "M. le Curé blessed me," they would say.

The church was always full now at mass on Sunday, fuller than ever it used to be. The men came too, standing huddled together at the west door, as their custom was, but very quiet lest they should lose any of the sermon. For the curé had lost his old fire, and his voice seemed weak. He rarely scolded them now; but there was something which they couldn't put into words, which touched their hearts and moved their wills in a way he never used to be able to do—some new power they didn't understand and were hardly even conscious of, but which nevertheless drew them Sunday by Sunday to come and listen.

For suffering has a power which few realize and none can explain, but which all recognize, save perhaps the sufferer himself. As the curé paced his garden reciting the familiar office psalm, which seemed every day to contain fresh meaning for him, or as he raised the chalice in his hands, pleading the one great Sacrifice, he little guessed that God was using him in a wonderful and new way; that by the crushing and breaking of self great spirit-

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ual forces had been set free, and were being poured forth through him on all with whom he came in contact.

Sébastien knew nothing of this, yet when he looked at the old priest standing there with his thumb in his well-worn breviary, something seemed to stir in his heart. He rose shamefacedly and stood before him twirling his cap in his hand.

“Le Moigne!” exclaimed the curé in amazement. “Is it you? But”—and his eyes sought the metal cross on which Sébastien’s name gleamed in white letters—“I thought I had buried you!”

## CHAPTER XVII

### RENÉ'S DIARY

*April*

**I** ONCE thought that life was like sitting in a railway carriage and watching the country fly past; so many things happened and scenes changed so quickly; but now it is as if the train had been moved into some siding and was never going on again. Life here is so monotonous. If a new face is seen among the prisoners when we take our daily exercise, or if another warder pushes my food through the hatchway, it causes a flutter of excitement. And yet, though the days pass very slowly, time goes quickly. I can only judge of the seasons by a tree whose branches I can see if I climb on to the table, and by reaching up on tiptoe I can just see out of the window. The branches stretch up above the high prison wall, but not near enough to be any aid if some bold man were to make a rush for freedom; yet he would have little chance to get away from the island even if he succeeded in escaping from the prison. Hardly one in a thousand has succeeded; and if he were caught and recaptured life would be made intolerable for him here.

When I came the leaves were falling. I would count them morning by morning to see how many were left each day, for something to do; but to-day when I climbed up I saw the first glimmer of green on the

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twigs, soon the buds will form and the spring will be here, but it is still very cold.

\* \* \* \*

Often I recall how the Mother Superior of the Carmelite Nuns at Quimper used to tell me how rapidly time passed with them, so that Easter had hardly gone before the autumn was upon them, and Christmas followed fast on that. "A life of prayer," she said, "eliminated time."

I must try to make that true for myself. When I first came I made a calendar on which I crossed out each day as it came, as I used to do long ago at the Seminary, but I have destroyed it. I want to take no count of the days, so that they will pass the sooner, and I am beginning to succeed. For to-day I was expecting my work to be passed in by the warder, when instead I heard the bell for chapel. It was Sunday and I had forgotten! I must have said my breviary very carelessly or I should have known, and I am also letting slip the black-letter days, so I must go back to a calendar. Perhaps if I content myself with my breviary, I shall keep count sufficiently. God help me not to look forward. It is that which plays havoc with a man's mind here.

\* \* \* \*

The summer is getting on apace. It is so hot in my cell I feel almost stifled. I work in my shirt sleeves. Oh, to see the sun once more and smell the salt waves, and push the water from me with strong



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strokes; or lie on its yielding surface, letting it lap over my face, and look up from its embrace into the blue sky.

Ah, I mustn't think of such things. I must think only of God—God Who never forsakes me. When I was free I would puzzle myself over the meaning of the phrase the "Kingdom of God," but now I know that I am already in it. Already I am an heir of that everlasting Kingdom which men have been searching for through all the ages. In one year of prison life God seems to have revealed to me mysteries the solution of which I in vain sought to find in the world. It is so simple really. All the great things which really matter are so simple that the wise and prudent will always look too high to find them, while the little children see them lying at their feet. Christ told us that the Kingdom of Heaven was in our hearts, so of course we must already be heirs here and now, of heaven. Never is a man a greater possessor and heritor than when everything we count as wealth is cut off. Not even these rough clothes I wear are mine. All bear the government mark—my tin mug, my blanket—nothing belongs to me, but my breviary and a book or two, and yet never have I felt richer than now, for I begin to understand what it means to be an heir through hope of those unsearchable riches of which the Apostle speaks. Here in this cell they are mine, here I have found heaven—a heaven I never found in my freedom. Christ is in me, the hope of Glory.

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## THE SACRAMENT OF SILENCE

If I told others they would hardly believe me, for it sounds almost strange, yet I am never dull here, nor do I ever feel as lonely as I used to at Pont-Croix. How can I be dull with God, or lonely, when He is beside me all day! I talk to Him as I often imagined I would have talked to my father, if he had not died before I was old enough to remember. There is always so much to tell God, and in the solitude of my cell He seems to tell me things which I could never have heard or understood when my mind was taken up with my work and the parish. I know now that this is God's will for me, and the knowledge brings me an untold peace, a sense of absolute rest. Without it this life would indeed be hell—the total inaction, utter stagnation and cutting off from all useful work, the hateful sense of constant surveillance, its hardness and bareness, the sordid ugliness and absence of true cleanliness. But why describe it all? It is better to forget, or take no notice. To put things into words only makes them the more tangible. God of His goodness has given me the knowledge, not only that I am fulfilling His will, but by so doing I am shielding another and helping him to work out his salvation. Oh, Sébastien, if you knew how I pray for you day by day, but you will never know. And Yvonne, may Our Lady have you always in her holy keeping!

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I have been ill and in hospital for a few days, but am better now. I am almost sorry to be back here, for it was a change and relief to get away from these smeared walls, and that back-breaking work, and lie

## THE SACRAMENT OF SILENCE

on a real bed. I had much time for thought too, and some talks with the chaplain. We discussed vicarious punishment. He had never thought much about it. The chaplaincy to a prison hardens a man, he said, otherwise you could not stand it for long. At first, he told me, you come with great hopes, thinking you will be able to touch the hearts of the most hardened, and that wonderful conversions will take place. But you are constantly deceived. The men are so practiced in deceiving, and they wish to curry favor with the chaplain by coming to confession, and so now he had come to dread hearing a confession lest it should not be a true one, and had ceased to do anything beyond the mere routine. And there I know he was speaking the truth, for this is almost the first time I have spoken to him outside the confessional. But I blame myself, for until I talked with him I had thought very little about him, and my prayer for him had been purely formal. Is it surprising we cannot get into touch with those for whom we never pray? And when we do pray how quickly the answer often comes. Over and over again I have found the most reserved open their hearts and tell me their troubles in a way which nothing but prayer could have made possible. We can never exhaust the wonders of prayer.

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As a rule I only meet the other prisoners in the exercising yard, but while I was in the hospital a bed near me was occupied. The poor man in it seemed too ill to do more than groan and curse, but sometimes I was

## THE SACRAMENT OF SILENCE

able to do some little thing to ease him, and once or twice he let me say a prayer beside him. I had not been able to get news of him since I left the hospital until two evenings ago, when the warder called to me through the hatchway, and asked me if I would go to him as he was dying and had begged to see me; and as I was a priest it would save him a journey to the chaplain, for I could confess him. How glad I was once more to exercise my priestly office. Poor fellow, he had been in prison for six years and the life had only hardened him. But God had worked through those few prayers we had said together, and it had aroused his better feelings. I gave him his absolution and a look of peace crept across his lined and bitter face. He had done his penance. The chaplain will say mass for his soul, and they have given me permission to be there.

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My interview with that poor man strengthened me in my resolution never to allow myself to look forward, but to live in each day as it passes. For the actual present is always bearable. It is the awful looking forward which makes up half the misery of prison life, the counting the days until release. I lose all count now except to mark the Feast days as they pass. I am sure that God will help me and support me in proportion to my trust in Him and dependence on Him.

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The day has come round again for my confession. In the world my sins troubled me very little compared with what they do now; though once I should have

## THE SACRAMENT OF SILENCE

thought there would be little chance of doing wrong in prison, which shows how little I understood about sin. At one time I thought it consisted in the wrong things I did, whereas now I see it lies rather in what I leave undone. Sin is, after all, refusal, the great refusal of Love. And here I am just beginning to understand what that means, and how the integral part of sin lies in the sphere of thought and will.

I have been almost afraid lately to kneel down at night, for God seems to come and stand over me and lays bare to me my heart. Sometimes I can scarcely suffer it; the pain is so searching. When He shows me His hands and His side, with the blood pouring forth from the wounds, I hardly know how to endure it. Sometimes in my cowardice I pray that He will leave me, but He is too pitiful to answer our ill-judged prayers. He will not leave me until He has wrung my heart, and then in His infinite compassion and kindness He gathers me into His arms and comforts me as a father comforts his little child. Then a great peace takes possession of me and a sweetness steals over me. It seems sometimes as if my cell were illuminated with a bright light and I can smell the sweet fragrance of incense. It may be the fragrance of the prayers which are ascending ceaselessly day and night to heaven, and of His mercy God allows a whiff of it to reach me in passing. How else can we explain that sweet odor of which so many have been conscious, where there was no earthly explanation possible?

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## THE SACRAMENT OF SILENCE

It is Christmas Eve. My thoughts go back to the midnight mass I once attended at Quimper. The cathedral was packed, and after the mass was over they threw open the great west door, and the people streamed out into the square, carrying with them the chairs they had brought to kneel on. The rich had brought upholstered drawing-room chairs, or light cane ones, and the peasants carried heavy wooden chairs. I stood out in the square until they closed the doors, looking through from the starlit darkness. The candles still blazed upon the High Altar, and up above on the clearstory electric lamps spelled out the word *Noël*, three times repeated, and stretching right across the chancel. When the lights were out I slipped in again by the side door, and watched by the crib all night.

This Christmas Eve I must make a manger in my heart. After all, this bare cell is more like to the cave at Bethlehem than that beautiful cathedral. How cutting the wind must have been that night as Mary and Joseph sought shelter, and how it must have pierced through the chinks in the rough door, and through the fissures of the rock, if indeed it were a cave in which Christ was born. This poor cell of mine is indeed a palace compared to that cold earthen-floored stable, warmed only by the breath of the cattle. How prickly the straw must have seemed to Joseph as he heaped it together to make a bed for Mary and the Child. And if I find the lack of clean linen here in my cell hard to tolerate, what must Mary have undergone in a stable amid the cattle?

## THE SACRAMENT OF SILENCE

Never have I seemed to realize until to-night what it must have meant to the Blessed Mother, to any mother, to bring forth her child amid such comfortless surroundings. Ah Mary, Mother of God, may I bear the Christ Child within my heart, as thou didst upon thy breast. O Mary Mother, pray for me.

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I have not written for a long time for a strange thing happened on Christmas Eve. As I prayed and emptied my heart as I could to make a manger of it for the Christ Child, a wonderful light shone all around me. I dared not open my eyes lest it should vanish, as that celestial light so often does when we open our eyes to the terrestrial. Then I saw, as in a blaze of glory, and as clearly as I now see the paper on which I am writing, a vision of the stable, and of Joseph kneeling on the ground over Mary's couch of straw. He was supporting her head with his hand, and bent over her with a wondering look of awe. Mary's eyes were shining with joy and adoration; such wonderful eyes, like windows to let out heaven's light. Her head was covered with a veil such as all Eastern women wear, and I could see nothing but her eyes. Her breast was bare and close against it she held a tiny Baby. A great fear and trembling seized me, as I looked upon that Babe, for I knew He was God Incarnate, and that I was gazing on a wondrous mystery. The Creator of the world was sustaining life from her to whom He had given life.

Often had I pondered on this mystery, preached about it, meditated on it, but now in one brief flash,



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lasting perhaps only a few seconds (I cannot tell for time seemed no longer to exist), I *saw* and believed. And with the vision there came to me a revelation of the spiritual which underlies all life. I seemed to see in one instant of time all that had ever happened to me, things which when happening had puzzled and bewildered me were now made clear, for I understood their spiritual significance, and the purpose which God had for me in them. For a brief second the tapestry of my life was reversed and I saw the design of the Creator and knew that it was good.

I think after that I must have fallen asleep, for I found myself still kneeling there when the warder's knock woke me, summoning me to chapel. I marched down the corridors and stone staircase with the others as if in a dream; I knelt with them at the altar and held the houseling cloth and received the Host, but then I knew no more until I woke up in the hospital where I now lie.

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I dare not write even here of what befell me when the priest put the Host upon my tongue, lest any should find this and read it. Such things must be secret between God and the soul to whom He reveals them. Only, as before I believed, now I know.

## CHAPTER XVIII

THE curé seems to have taken a new lease, of life" thought M. Laurent as he watched him stepping briskly down the box-lined path of the presbytère garden to the side gate leading to the church.

It was true that the curé did feel younger these last few days, since he had met Sébastien. He had believed him to be dead, and despair had filled his heart at the thought that René must undergo his unjust sentence, and that no power could release him; but with Sébastien's return everything was changed. If he could only work upon the conscience of the latter and get him to confess his crime, as he was in duty bound, René would be set free. There was something now to work for. He had spent a long time with Sébastien yesterday, pleading with him. He had worked upon his fears, pointing out the terrible judgment awaiting him if he refused to confess, for he knew he must use every possible means to get him to confession; and before he left Sébastien had promised



## THE SACRAMENT OF SILENCE

to come this morning. Would he keep his promise, or would his courage fail him?

The curé pushed aside the swing door and dipped his hand into the stoup. His lips moved in prayer. He looked anxiously round the church. It seemed so dark after the blaze of light outside that for a moment he could distinguish no one; then he saw a figure in a blue jersey crouching in the corner of the aisle. "He looks like a stricken animal," thought the curé as he made his way to him.

Sébastien remained seated with his head in his hands as the curé spoke to him. The latter wasted no words, it was not his way, but went directly to the point. He must make a clear and full confession, which he, the curé, could in no way divulge or use against him, as the seal of confession was inviolable. This he made very clear to Sébastien, but at the same time he himself must promise on his oath that he would give himself up to justice, and have the innocent man released; otherwise he could not give him absolution, and if receiving it he broke his promise it would only be the means of greater damnation to him.

Sébastien listened dully. He saw no escape.

## THE SACRAMENT OF SILENCE

Now that Yvonne knew, and all the village were talking, and most of them guessing that he must have been guilty of the murder—for no one, not even men like M. le Maire, who were most embittered against the Church and religion, for a moment believed the vicaire to be capable of such a crime—life at Pont-Croix had become impossible. True, he could go away to some distant part of the country, but Yvonne would never leave her mother, and his conscience would still dog him, wherever he went. If only he could kill his conscience, but the more he tried to stifle it the more it tormented him. He knew that the curé offered the one way of escape, and the only way of reinstating himself in Yvonne's eyes, and in the curé's, and indeed in his own. It would be almost a relief, thought Sébastien wearily, to give himself up to justice.

Though the curé spoke sternly, his heart was wrung with pity as he thought of what Sébastien must have suffered, and of what he still would have to suffer. If it had been he that had found him instead of René that evening, how much sorrow could have been saved. René, in his youth and ignorance, and full

## THE SACRAMENT OF SILENCE

of a passion for self-sacrifice, had altogether forgotten his duty as a priest. He had no right to help the guilty man to escape. Would to God it had been he instead of René. No sentimental pity would have swayed him, thought the old man, his eyes dim with sympathy, as he saw Sébastien's shoulders heave.

"Come, le Moigne," he said, laying his hand on his shoulder, "this will never do. Stick to your decision of last night and play the man. Remember Yvonne," he added in gentler tones, "and your child. You want to be lawfully wedded, don't you? Well, you know what the Church demands? Come now, don't waste time."

Sébastien wiped his eyes with the back of his hand, ashamed.

"Remember what I said last night. Take courage. It is God you must think of, not me, not yourself—a God who suffered far more than this for you."

Sébastien rose slowly and followed the curé to the confessional.

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"I wish our old country clergy had better manners," thought M. Laurent disdainfully,

## THE SACRAMENT OF SILENCE

as an hour later he sat opposite to M. Sévigny at *déjeuner*.

The curé was more than usually taciturn. He bent his head over his soup plate, scraping the bottom of the earthenware dish with his spoon, and setting M. Laurent's nerves ajar with the noise. Also there was much left to be desired in the curé's method of swallowing it. It sounded like water spluttering out of a tap, and M. Laurent wiped his lips carefully with his napkin, and tried to distract his thoughts by talk, for it annoyed him that he should bend them to such trivial matters as the curé's manners at table.

"I think perhaps, M. le Curé," said he suavely, "it would be as well for me to visit that neglected corner of the parish by the river this afternoon. None of the people there seem to have been to mass for some months, perhaps longer."

"Do what you like," answered the curé shortly.

"Shall you be visiting this afternoon?"

"No," said the old man, pushing his empty plate away and calling out "Jeannette."

## THE SACRAMENT OF SILENCE

“Allow me,” and M. Laurent sprang up to ring the bell.

“The bell’s broken,” said the curé after watching M. Laurent tug at it repeatedly in vain.

“Oh!” said Laurent, and as he turned he knocked right up against Jeannette who entered at that moment with a laden tray.

“There now!” she said angrily, as the gravy trickled down on to M. Laurent’s spick and span cassock, “a nice mess you’ve made of yourself and of my floor too, and I be spending half the morning polishing it. Can’t you sit still?”

“I didn’t know the bell was broken,” said M. Laurent meekly, trying to wipe off the gravy with his napkin.

“That’s not what I give you your napkin for,” she said crossly, snatching it out of M. Laurent’s hand, and rubbing down his cassock with her apron. “Between the two of you I never get a moment’s peace. What for do you go capering about like a monkey, upsetting everything?”

“That’s enough, Jeannette,” said the curé, trying to hide his amusement, for he was enjoying Laurent’s discomfiture.

## THE SACRAMENT OF SILENCE

“Well, Monsieur, I’m not deaf. I can hear you right enough when you call, and why M. le Vicaire must be in and out of his chair all the time——”

“Jeannette!” and the curé gave her a look which she knew she must not ignore, but they could hear her grumbling to herself all the way back to the kitchen.

The curé turned apologetically to his vicaire.

“You must excuse our rough ways. Jeannette forgets herself sometimes, but she is a good sort, and has stuck to me for thirty years.”

“Long enough for you to teach her better manners than, Monsieur,” answered M. Laurent, for he felt nettled. His cassock was a new one, and really these peasants were unbearable.

“And where, Monsieur, did you learn yours?” asked the curé severely. “Perhaps, Monsieur Laurent,” he added, “you would be more comfortable in rooms of your own. I have often thought of suggesting it.”

Laurent reddened, for he had a good heart and felt tenderly towards the old curé. His faults were those of his fastidious upbringing.

## THE SACRAMENT OF SILENCE

"I ask your pardon, Monsieur," he said humbly. "Forgive me."

M. le Curé stretched out his hand across the table. He never felt he had liked his new vicaire so much.

"I am really very glad to have you, Laurent. Forgive my bad temper. I have much anxiety just now."

Laurent took the proffered hand eagerly.

"I know, Monsieur, and I wish I could help you."

"You can, you can pray," said the curé simply. "Pray that God will give me grace to guide a soul much tempted."



## CHAPTER XIX

SÉBASTIEN knelt for long in the church after his confession. He was conscious of the sense of relief which comes to a weak will when it lets itself rest entirely on one stronger than itself. He no longer felt like a hunted animal. Now that he had resolved to give himself up to justice he would be able to look men in the face again; that haunting fear of being found out and caught ceased to exist for him.

The curé had spoken very severely. He had glossed over nothing, but had brought home vividly to him the mercy of God in sparing him to make his confession and atone for his sin. God had even given him the opportunity of setting an innocent man free. When Sébastien wavered at the thought of giving himself up, the curé's scorn had scorched him, and made such a cowardly course seem utterly impossible. Also, as the old man shrewdly remarked, if Sébastien was found out, as probably he would be sooner or later,



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his punishment would be far more severe than if he gave himself up to justice of his own free will. The crime had, after all, been unpremeditated. The judge would take into account the provocation of the moment, and his lack of intention to murder; everything would really be in his favor if he confessed voluntarily. "But," said the curé, "if you try to hide your sin and escape justice, I cannot promise you one moment's peace for the remainder of your life. It would remain for ever on your conscience. Your life would already become the hell into which you would be doomed at your death to enter for all eternity. You would have committed the unpardonable sin, and though you might seek it then with tears, you would find no place for repentance."

Sébastien shuddered as he listened, for he had built his hopes, as the peasant so often does, upon confessing all at his death and receiving then his absolution; without which, according to all the teaching he had received, he knew he must be damned. The experience he had already gone through of those long months at sea, a prey to his torturing con-

## THE SACRAMENT OF SILENCE

science, tormented by doubts and distress and misery, proved to him only too surely the truth of the picture the curé drew of what his future life would be if he evaded justice. And Yvonne—even if she said nothing, her reproachful look and the consciousness of how she felt would be more than he could stand. It was indeed a choice between evils.

The curé knew the impressionable character he had to deal with, and how important it was Sébastien should be made to act before his good resolution cooled, so he proposed that he should go himself with him to Rennes, where the assizes would soon be held, and where he would have to await his trial, and Sébastien gladly accepted the offer. The curé advised him to say nothing to his old mother, but to tell all to Yvonne; and to-morrow morning before the early mass they were to come to the church, and he would say the marriage service over them and give them their communion. He fixed it at a very early hour so that there would be no one there but themselves. At the same time he rebuked Sébastien very severely for his fall, showing how the one sin had led to the other.

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“We forget, my son, how sin weakens the will, and prepares for us pitfalls into which we should not have conceived it possible for us ever to fall. Three years ago it would have been impossible, humanly speaking, for you to have attacked a man who had done you absolutely no injury; but you had placed yourself within the devil’s power by your unbridled passions.”

“I can’t think how I did it,” Sébastien kept repeating.

“It is the law of retribution, my son. You know how you neglected your prayers. At night you were tired with your day’s work; in the morning you clung to your bed until the last moment. Then you gave up your communions, your confessions. You let your lower nature assert itself more and more, and killed your spiritual. And God could do nothing; for He didn’t make us slaves. He left you free to choose. ‘An offering of a free heart will I give thee.’ You are free now, and before you lies a supreme choice; you give up your natural freedom but regain your spiritual freedom, and I promise you that God will sustain and help you in ways which you could

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never guess. It may be that in prison you will begin to learn what true freedom means.

“Then again remember your old friend who is at this present moment suffering for you. Will you be outdone in generosity? Or, if the thought of Monsieur Kermarec does not stir you, will not your crucifix move you? God Who loved you so much that He humbled Himself and became man—a poor man like you are—and after a toilsome life He endured an agonizing and shameful death. Ah, my son, what are a few years’ imprisonment compared to that!”

And Sébastien had promised in a voice half choked with tears. It was no sudden penitence, for those long hours of solitude at sea had helped to soften his heart. Nature, God’s handmaid, had prepared the ground for the seed.

Yet a few hours later everything seemed very different to Sébastien. He was sitting by the fireside watching Yvonne prepare the evening meal, while he nursed the child. She lay on his lap kicking her feet and cooing, and every now and again she tried to tug at his beard with her tiny hands. Why must

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he leave all this? His child was already beginning to know him, and to hold out her arms when he came into the cottage. It was too hard to give himself up; he couldn't and wouldn't. He would just wait until they fetched him; perhaps no one would find out.

Yvonne cast anxious glances at him as she washed up the dishes, and then she took the child and laid her back in the cradle, and drew up a low stool by the fire. She raked the peat clods together so as to make a blaze, and threw on some wood, for the evening was chilly.

"Now, *mon mari*," she said, laying her head against his knee caressingly, "tell me all M. le Curé said."

So Sébastien told her quite simply what the curé had said. He ought, he felt, to comfort her, and persuade her to let him go; but instead it was she who comforted him, and wiped away the great tears as they fell, as if he were a little child. The strength and courage of women always come as a surprise to men, and Sébastien was no exception. He couldn't have believed Yvonne would have taken it like this, and he struggled against an

## THE SACRAMENT OF SILENCE

unworthy feeling of pique. Did she perhaps want him to go?

“Don’t you see, Sébastien,” she said, as if answering his thoughts, “how dreadful it would be for us both if you stayed on here as if nothing had happened, and all the time poor Monsieur René were there in prison instead of you? We could neither of us have an hour’s peace.”

“That’s just what M. le Curé said. But what will you do all alone, without me?”

“Haven’t I been alone for more than a year? And wasn’t it much worse for me then, Sébastien, when I thought you were dead? Ah, darling,” and she took his great rough hand in hers, “isn’t it strange now to think how I went down every week to put flowers on your grave! And yet somehow I never felt you were there. I thought you would come back some day. And oh, what a lot of prayers I said for you, and now God has answered them all, for now, Sébastien, you have been absolved; and now you can be as brave as Monsieur René, for *le bon Dieu* will help you. You don’t like to hear about Monsieur René, do you?” she said, looking up at him.

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"I know you don't. Do you remember years ago, when we were quite little, how you called him a coward? But he was never a coward, and oh," and she laid her head on his knee, "I couldn't bear it if any one said *you* were a coward. I want to be proud of you again."

Sébastien put his arm round her and pressed her to him.

"Poor Yvonne, I am so sorry. I didn't realize how I made you suffer."

"Ah, you will never know how I suffered those long months—when the neighbors looked at one another, and nudged each other and whispered as they passed; and how I dreaded going down to the market, or even to mass."

"And did you suspect me, Yvonne?" asked Sébastien sadly.

"How could I help it? It was your knife. M. le Curé showed it to me, and that horrid woman who used to clean out the church said such things to me."

"How you must have suffered, *chère petite*," he whispered.

"But it was worse when the little one was born, and no one would speak to me. Why



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did you do it, Sébastien? Why didn't you marry me before you left?"

Sébastien reddened.

"You know I meant to," he said.

Yvonne had released herself from his arms. She was sitting now supporting her face in her hands, and looking into the fire.

"If I had only understood I would never have done it. I should never have let you. I didn't understand. I had no mother."

It was my fault," and Sébastien stroked her cheek.

"And we should have had such a happy wedding with all the bells ringing, and a *fête* and dancing—and now!"

"Yvonne, don't, please don't."

"We will never let her know, shall we?" and Yvonne looked tenderly at the cradle.

"And what will you say when she grows up and asks where her father is?" asked Sébastien suddenly. He had never thought of that. "Yes, what will you say?" and he made Yvonne turn her head so that he could see into her eyes.

"I shall say," said she, answering his look proudly, and taking his hand, "that her



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father was suffering because he was a brave man, who didn't shirk his duty, and I shall teach her to pray for you every evening that *le bon Dieu* may bring you home in safety."

"Yvonne, my brave little wife! I will try to be worthy of you."

## CHAPTER XX

**S**UCH a strange thing has happened. I can hardly believe it. Can it be true? M. Sévigny has been to see me. I found him sitting beside my bed when I woke up. I am still very weak. I have to hide my notebook, for the doctor has forbidden me to write, but I must just put this down to make sure I am not dreaming. He looks so much older than I remembered, and he hardly said anything. Was it really he?

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It is quite true. I have seen him again. He has come all this way on purpose to see me—to tell me such wonderful news. Sébastien has come back again. He wasn't drowned after all. How glad I am that I am here instead of him, and he and Yvonne are happy together! Little Yvonne! Her eyes were dark as violets in early spring. I wonder if her child will grow up like her.

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They hid my paper and pencil, and I could not find them yesterday. I have lost count of the days. I often wake to find the curé sitting beside me. He doesn't speak much, but I shall miss him when he goes. . . .

He has been beside me again. He says he is waiting to take me back with him, but I am not strong enough to travel. I can't understand it, but I am too tired to ask. Why am I free? He has said nothing more about

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Sébastien. I must ask, when I feel less tired. . . . The curé still talks of taking me home with him, but I shall never leave here.

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He told me Sébastien and Yvonne are married. Thank God for that. Poor little Yvonne! How I have prayed for her!

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The curé sat in the Governor's study biting his pen. His face wore an anxious, drawn look, and his brow was puckered with perplexity. If he only could know if René would recover! Surely God wouldn't let him die now, it would be too hard. No, he must trust for the best and arrange everything as well as he could. The doctor had said this weakness was natural. The strain of prison life was great on a man of René's temperament. The good food and all the care he was having would soon pick him up.

The curé took some sheets of blue, checkered paper, lying on the Governor's desk, and began to write in his careful, old-fashioned hand. Writing was always a labor to him.

"Dear Monsieur Laurent,

"We hope that M. Kermarec will be well enough to bear the journey home in about a week's time. I

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am sorry to cause you any inconvenience, but you will understand that it will be best for him to return to his familiar room, as he is still very weak and will need nursing. I think you would find comfortable quarters with Madame Germaine, a good woman, who lives close to the church, and whom I think you already know; for I shall count on your continued help, as I fear M. Kermarec will not be fit for work for some months to come. The confinement has told upon him very severely."

He signed and blotted it and laid it by.

"Now I must write to Yvonne. I have never written to her before.

" 'Dear Madame le Moigne,' *no, that isn't natural.*

" 'My dear Child,' *yes, that will do.*

"Poor M. René is very ill. I found him in the hospital ward when I arrived, but the doctor hopes that he is gaining strength, so we must put our trust in God, who arranges all for the best for His children. Sébastien was brought here two days ago. They have let me speak with him, but I have not yet ventured to tell M. René, as the least thing excites him and throws him back; but I hope before I leave to ask the Governor to let them meet, for I think it would comfort Sébastien. He feels M. René's illness very much, and is, I think, most truly penitent, and anxious to bear his punishment well. As you know I said all I could for him in the Court, and his voluntary submission to the

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law told very greatly in his favor. If he earns all the good-conduct marks he is entitled to,—and I fully hope he will, for he has set his mind to do so—the sentence will be further remitted, and you may have him back with you in three years' time instead of four; or possibly in two years.

“So take courage, *mon enfant*, and never cease to pray both for him and M. René. Sébastien will not be allowed to write until he has been here a month, but you may write to him; but say nothing that you would not like another to read, for all prisoners' letters have, of course, to be opened and very possibly read. The Governor seems a kind-hearted man, and takes an interest in the case. So be courageous, and may God bless you.

“Your affectionate father in Christ,  
“JEAN-BAPTISTE SÉVIGNY.”

The curé leaned his head upon his hands, and then he took up his pen again and added a postscript with dim eyes—

“Do not forget to pray daily for Monsieur René and your old curé, that God may give them both a safe and speedy home-coming.”

Then he drew up another sheet of paper.

He was very tired, and it was close in this bare little study. He had never quite re-

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covered from the long uncomfortable journey; yet there was one more letter he must write, and then his duty would be done. He must prepare Jeannette, so that she would have everything ready for René's return.

"You will see a great change in Monsieur le Vicaire," he wrote. "His hair has gone quite gray and he is very thin, but so far I have only seen him in bed. He is still very weak, but the doctor hopes he may be able for the journey shortly, and when once at home he will pick up his strength again. I have written to M. Laurent and have suggested to him that he might find rooms with Madame Germaine, or there is Madame Guillaume at the Inn. I am certain you will do all you can to make everything as comfortable as possible for Monsieur René. I should like you to put the sofa from the salon into his bedroom. I believe, Jeannette, that you will be as pleased to see him back as I shall be to have him!"

"There," he said folding the paper, "that's done. Dear Jeannette, she has such a warm heart hidden under such a sharp tongue. I wish she were here now. What would I not give for one of her excellent cups of *café noir*!"

Few who knew the curé guessed how much there had been of sacrifice and self-denial in

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his early life. It was that which had given him his mellow cheerfulness, and unfailing optimism. A whiff of good tobacco through the half-opened door reminded him now of a pleasure which it had required much effort of will to renounce.

"Ah," exclaimed the doctor, kicking-to the door with his foot, and throwing himself into the only easy-chair of which the room boasted. "I thought I would find you here. Just been to see your young friend. You know it's no use?" and he paused to flick the ash off his cigar. "It's no use your cherishing any false hopes. Kermarec can never return to Brittany. If he does live it will be to the south you must take him."

The curé looked at the neat little pile of letters lying at his elbow.

"Is that your verdict?" he said quietly.

"Yes; and you see if he did live," and the doctor secured a cushion in a still better position at his back, "if a chap like that were to go on living, his life would be useless to himself or to any one else. He would just cumber the ground. We've got too many of those useless——"



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The curé's chair scraped noisily across the bare floor as he rose. How angry the cheap cynicism and thoughtless judgments of this young man made him! However, there was no use in arguing. Life was the only thing, and experience, to teach these conceited young fools.

"Well, Monsieur," he said, interrupting him, "it's your business to save life. The Great Gardener knows best which plants He wants in His garden. All have their use no doubt."

The doctor looked quizzically at him.

"I never quite understand you, Monsieur le Curé. Sometimes you are quite amazingly full of common sense—for a priest, and at another—well—frankly—you talk nonsense."

"You're a young man, Monsieur Christen," he said, looking down searchingly into the clear gray eyes, which looked up at him full of amusement, "and most of your life lies before you, and I am old; so you will forgive an old man if he preaches to you—but be warned. You have chosen a profession beset with dangers; one which draws you into the very heart of the mysteries of God's Kingdom.



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Let Him teach you His own secrets. It's not for us to judge. Most tremendous problems will meet you—have already met you—at every turn. But keep your heart clean and your hands firm, and do your work simply and trustfully; and leave the problems to God."

Then he added, taking up his broad-brimmed hat from the chair on which it was lying, "And do your best, Monsieur, for my young friend."

The doctor uncrossed his long legs and sat up.

"Believe me, Monsieur, I will. But it's no use holding out false hopes, is it? How I wish I could," he added, rising, as he noticed the old man's mouth suddenly twitch with pain.

The curé set his hat firmly on his head and took the other's outstretched hand.

"God's will be done," he said simply.

The young man looked after him, then he closed the door and sank back into his chair.

"The 'will of God,'" he echoed, as he puffed at his cigar. "Yes, they all say that,—

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the bravest ones. The others curse. Ah, well! it helps them out, I expect. Cursing or praying—we all come to that in the end—and the bravest ones—pray. Confound this cigar! It's gone out."

## CHAPTER XXI

**J**EANNETTE no sooner received the curé's letter than she began her cleaning operations, hardly waiting until poor M. Laurent had vacated the room. "She never cleaned it like that for me," he thought rather ruefully, as he gathered together his possessions, which she had already piled into a heap in her eagerness for him to be gone.

There were few things in which Jeannette more delighted than a thorough cleaning and rearrangement of furniture. She had soon got the sofa up from the salon into M. René's room, seizing upon M. Laurent to help her, and had scrubbed and dusted and polished so vigorously that the walnut table reflected her white cap in it as in a mirror. Then when everything was as bright as she could make it, she looked round wondering what the room still lacked.

"Maybe it's a flower," she said to herself. "Monsieur René was always one for a flower."

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So she went out into the garden and gathered all she could find in the box-lined beds; sweet peas and stocks, and mignonette and marigold, and tied them up in a tight little posy such as they sell in the markets in Brittany. René had often bought such a posy, and would cut the tight binding and set the poor flowers loose, arranging them into less glowing assortments of color. Then Jeannette stuck her posy into a vase far too small for it, and set it on a mat in the center of the small walnut table. "He will like the smell of them anyway," she said, sniffing them, but not altogether satisfied with the result of her labors. Then, remembering the vicaire's great delight in "smells," she went back into the garden to gather a handful of rosemary and southernwood, verbena and lavender, and climbed the stairs again to lay the sweet-scented herbs in the drawers among his clean shirts, and scattered more between the coarse but spotless linen sheets laid out all ready for his bed.

Then she stood with arms akimbo in the middle of the room. The window was wide open, and the scent of the box came in from the garden. A bee was humming drowsily,

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and the lapping of the river against the stone wall smote the air lazily, and added to the sense of peace which somehow invaded the quiet little room.

"I've a feeling there's something missing," said Jeannette aloud. "Why, to be sure, it's the crucifix! Now where can Monsieur le Curé have gone and put that to? It's the first thing Monsieur René will be looking for," and she racked her brains to try and remember where it could be. 'Had M. le Curé put it in his own room? No, it wasn't there. She knew he had brought it back with him from Rennes, for she remembered his telling her how greatly Monsieur René had wanted to take it to his convict prison, but the authorities didn't allow him to.

But Jeannette never found it, though she hunted long. Indeed M. le Curé had thrust it into his bag, when he packed hastily, after having gained permission to go himself with the good news to René.

At that moment he had placed it in René's hands.

René lay back gasping for breath. His cheeks were almost as white as the sheets,

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and sunken like an old man's; and his hair was so gray that it would have been hard for any one who had known him two years ago to have recognized him again. His hands clutched the crucifix as though the touch of it gave him relief from pain.

The old man put his arms round him trying to support him, and to ease his breathing. There was no one in the ward, and he dare not leave him alone to call the doctor. Besides there was nothing to be done. The doctor had warned him that the end might come at any moment; nothing but a miracle could save him now.

How he had prayed for that miracle! Surely God wouldn't take him away now, when he seemed to be just given back to them again: at the very moment of his freedom! The tears fell unheeded down the old man's cheeks and splashed on the pillow. He bent his head down to René's ear.

"Speak to me, René," he whispered, "just one word. Say my name," he pleaded—"only one word."

But René had passed beyond the limitations of speech. His head dropped forward

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heavily, and the curé laid him gently back on the pillow.

A hushed silence seemed to fill the room. The mystery of death held him in its presence. He dared not move. For a moment or two he stood as if waiting for something to pass. Then the tension relaxed, and the old man dropped down on his knees beside the bed.

A great wave of desolation swept across him. He seemed to drown in it. He must have time to recover. He must be alone.

There are times in life when loneliness seems to assume a tangible shape, so real is it; it takes us by the throat and shakes us as a puppy does a mat. Nearness to God entails loneliness, and God is never far away at the sacrament of death.

For half an hour the curé knelt motionless, and then the noise of footsteps on the stone corridor outside roused him.

René's thin hands, roughened by his prison work, were already cold when the curé bent to kiss them. Then he lifted his lips to the crucifix which was still tightly clutched in the stiff fingers.

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"*Fiat voluntas Dei*," he said through his sobs, and a tear dropped down and washed the feet of the wooden figure.

"I thought I should find you here," and the doctor's voice broke the silence suddenly. "It's come, has it?" he added in a lower tone, looking down at the bed. "So it's all over. Well! It's better so. I doubt if he could ever have recovered his strength. He would always have been a weakling."

"A weakling," cried the curé, roused to a sudden anger, for great grief often begets great anger in the heart of a strong man. "A weakling! It's you materialists who measure men by their girth and blood and muscle. It's you who are the weaklings, with your narrow minds and your lack of vision!"

The doctor stared in amazement. "What a surprise this old man is," he thought, "one minute so meek, and the next as furious as a turkey cock." He laid his hand upon his curé's shoulder. "Come, Monsieur," he said persuasively, "come to the study and rest a little. You are tired out."

"Leave me alone," answered the curé testily. "Do you hear?"



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M. Christen turned with a shrug of his shoulder.

"Oh, well, as you please. You will find me in my den if you want me." Then halfway to the door he paused. "I shall have to send the ward nurse. She will be disturbing you soon, I fear."

"Can't a man have any privacy?" muttered the curé savagely.

"Not in prison, Monsieur, unfortunately." And the doctor closed the door behind him and went whistling down the corridor.

"After all, these good men don't set us much of an example," he thought to himself.

The poor old curé was ashamed of his outburst. He didn't kneel down again, but he reverently closed the eyes which were half opening, and kissed René on the forehead. Then he said the prayers over him, and blessed him. After that he gathered together the few little possessions René had been allowed, which lay in the drawer of the table beside the bed. Hidden away in the corner of the drawer, the curé found a little gray notebook, one he recognized which he had bought in the village shop at Pont-Croix, and sent to

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René at his request. What had the boy used it for? He opened it with the reverence one feels for anything that has belonged to one who is just dead. His eyes fell on the last entry. It was faintly written in pencil, in a straggling hand. He could hardly make it out, so he took it to the window to get the last rays of daylight, for the evening was closing in.

Last night I saw the Holy Mother. She was leaning as if faint from grief against a rough wooden post. At first I thought it was Yvonne, but then I saw blood upon the post, and looking higher I saw two feet pierced by a great nail which fastened them down on to the rough wood. Then I understood, but I dared not lift my eyes higher. I dared not look. The nail made such a great hole, and the blood poured so fast. Some had dropped upon her veil. Soon the vision grew dim, and faded away, and I knew it meant that my feet also were fastened there . . . that freedom here is not for me. My freedom is boundless. . . . It lies in hope. . . . How does it go?

*"Heredes sumus secundum spem vitae aeternae."*

The last words were written very faintly. The curé's eyes could hardly see them.

He closed the book reverently and slipped it into the pocket of his cassock.

## EPILOGUE

IT was a glorious summer evening. The sun was on the point of setting, and the sea was bathed in gold. The curé, leaning heavily on Sébastien's arm, turned up the road towards the cemetery. No words passed between them since none were needed; for had not this become a custom—this walk together—evening by evening—to visit René's grave?

It lay close to the stone tomb of the former curé; just a simple granite cross with a small metal crucifix let into the stone, and below the name and date were the words: *Majorem hac dilectionem nemo habet, ut animam suam ponat quis pro amicis suis.*

The curé took off his hat, and the wind played with his silvery hair. His lips moved in prayer. Sébastien also bared his head and stood at the foot of the grave. His thick hair was grizzled, and he had not let his beard grow again since leaving prison. It was a strangely beautiful face as the light fell across

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it. The lines around the mouth expressed suffering, but the look of hardness which used to be there had gone, and is not suffering the foundation of all the highest and most enduring human beauty? The eyes had lost their sparkle, but they were still as keen as ever—a sailor's eyes—alert and quick. But they were dimmed at the moment by thought.

"*Mon père*," he said, "how can I ever repay him?"

You are repaying him, my son, in the way he would most have wished."

"But can I make no reparation?"

"Were those three years in prison no reparation? They cost you much, more perhaps than you knew."

Sébastien winced. Those long weary weeks and months of prison life had indeed been bitter, but he was strong, his health hadn't suffered, and Monsieur René?

"I oughtn't to be here," he said bitterly. "It's *he* that ought to be standing here."

Don't look back, my son," said the curé laying his frail hand on Sébastien's. "Go forward and use the life that your friend has saved for you. I am nearing the close of

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mine. I have much to regret—God alone knows how much—all my miserable failures—yet every day I say to myself as I rise: Here I have another day, another whole, wonderful day to live for God. It's the only secret against weariness, or shall we call it cowardice? Believe me, my son, He won't keep us waiting when we are ready for Him. He is always ready for us, but He has to wait until we are ready for Him. Is it not so?"

The iron gate of the cemetery swung to with a crash, and the clatter of a child's sabots was heard on the gravel path. The curé turned and found a seat on the edge of the priest's tomb, and as he sat down a little girl came running up, and with a merry laugh hid her face against his cassock.

"My little Yvonne!" he exclaimed, fondling her as well as he could for the stiffness of her wide collar and her little cap. "What dost thou here, *ma petite*?"

The gate clicked again and her mother came hastening up, a little out of breath.

"*Tiens*, little one," she cried, "you mustn't tease Monsieur le Curé. You must forgive us, Monsieur," she added, "but she ran away

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from me. She is so quick, and she ran away wanting to find her father."

Little Yvonne shook her head protestingly.

"No, me wanted M'siur Curé," and she nestled up against the old man's shoulder.

The curé made a place beside him for her mother.

"Sit down here, my child," he said tenderly. "It is good that we should meet here together. And so my little Yvonne ran away?" he said playfully, stroking the child's long curls which had escaped from her cap.

She peeped at him roguishly out of the corner of her eyes, and then hid her face again in his cassock.

"Come, little one," he said, lifting her up on his knee. "Why do you pretend to be shy, you little coquette. Have you lost your voice?"

She put up her hands and began to play with his bands.

Her mother rebuked her. "No, no, *petite*, you mustn't play with Monsieur le Curé's *rabat*."

"Pitty beads," cried the child with glee, trying to count them, "pitty beads. Why's

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'oo here?" she asked suddenly, stopping her counting, "'oo and papa?"

"We were thinking about a very brave man. Your father and I come here every evening to see him."

Yvonne's eyes—so like her mother's—opened very wide.

"'oo can't see him," she said nodding her head sagely.

"Why not, *petite*?"

"'Cause he's covered up. He's under the flowers. Mother tolded me. Was he very, very brave?"

"Very brave," said the curé emphatically.

"As brave as papa?"

"Much, much braver," answered Sébastien in a voice which trembled.

"Who's the bravest man of all the whole world?" she asked, putting her face close up to the curé's.

The old man lifted her up and placed her on the tomb.

"Look up there, little one," he said.

"Me knows that Man," she said solemnly.

"They hurted Him so," and she stretched up on tiptoe and tried to get hold of a nail



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with her chubby little fingers. "The naughty men hurted Him with these hard nails. They'se so hard," she cried panting with her exertions. "'oo must help me." But they both remained silent. "Help me to pull them out," demanded the child again imperiously.

The curé rose with difficulty. He was getting very old.

"They won't come out that way, *ma petite*."

The child paused for a moment thinking, with a very solemn look on her face.

"Will they if me tisses them?" she asked, a smile breaking out.

"Yes," said the curé reverently.

"Lift me up," she demanded.

So the curé lifted her up, and she pressed her soft little lips to the hard granite. Such wet kisses they were, almost as wet as tears! First she kissed one hand, and then the other. "And now His feet," she cried, "lots for His poor feet," and she stroked them gently.

Yvonne had crept up to Sébastien's side, and both stood watching the child with dim eyes.

THE END



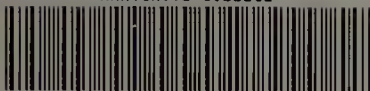


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